

The Significance of Native Indian Presence in American Literature

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Abstract - The image of the Native Indian, was used on both sides of the Atlantic for many years but subsequent to the American war, which was waged against Great Britain in 1812, the Native Indian image was given a previously unseen prominence in American literary works. This status lasted for almost half a century. The reason for this swift change of reputation of the Native Indians is revealed through this paper. The works of Irving, Cooper, Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Melville have been referred to in order to strengthen my premise. Irving, Cooper and Long fellow built their works around the Native Indians thus clearly proving their importance in American literature of the early 19th century. On the contrary, in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, the respective authors, Hawthorne and Melville bring out the importance of the Native Indians through their almost imperceptible presence. To understand this, a basic understanding of the plots being required, the storylines of the novels are concisely unfolded through a narrative analysis deriving from a qualitative approach. This enables the reader to understand Hawthorne and Melville's approach in establishing the significance of the Native Indians. In conclusion, both techniques illustrate the sudden boost in status of the so long neglected Native Indians in the American literary sphere.

Keywords: American Literature, Native Indians, Status change, American war of 1812

I. INTRODUCTION

The Europeans and the Americans could ironically be considered as one people divided by the same language. American literature is prose or verse written in the English language on American soil. At the onset of the production of American Literary works, English literature was the benchmark against which they were judged. From the inception of American literature, Native Indian presence has been a prominent element. The Native Indians from whom their territory was usurped by the European invaders, were portrayed as devilish by some, while others considered them as virtuous. Mrs Mary Rowlandson described them as 'atheistical, proud, wild, cruel, barbarous, brutish, (in one word) diabolical Creatures... the worse of heathen.' (Berkhofer 1979) though certain writers described them as the 'Noble Savage'. Berkhofer(1979) states that 'Ter Ellingson in his in-depth study of the problematic nature of the very concept of the myth of the Noble Savage, suggests that it may have originated in Marc Lescabot's ethnological studies of the Indians of eastern Canada first published in 1609 (Ellingson, 2001, 12-13).' Berkhofer also points out that, "in the English colonies the literary and ideological use

of the Noble Savage came on the scene only during the Revolutionary era." Another reason for Native Indians being termed as 'Noble', very specially by the Europeans was because they were considered as humane people living in serene settings and hence, could be used as a foil in the politically and religiously troubled European environment. The Europeans used the idea of the Noble Savage 'to criticize existing social institutions and to propose reform.' (Berkhofer 1979) This resulted in the Native Indian image being used as a tool for political and economic reasons in Europe. Berkhofer (1979) states that the American and French revolutions marked the turning point of the Noble Savage as a political device. Thus, the Noble Savage, although he continued to figure in literature and imaginative works, was displaced by the events of modern history in the arguments and polemics of social philosophers and political reformers. Though displaced from Europe one observes that he gained importance in America. Prior to the American war of 1812, according to Benjamin T. Spencer (1957) "In almost any version of a national culture before 1815 he [the Indian] assumed an unheroic and antinational guise". Following the rupture with Europe, the Native Indian gained much significance in American art and literature until the end of Civil war, in 1865. The reason for this is explored in this study. The works of Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, H.W. Longfellow, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, which have been used for this paper, indicate the different methods through which these authors portrayed the 'glory' bestowed upon the Native Indian in American literature and art.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A persistent interest in the subject of Native Americans led to the gathering of information on them, from books, journal papers as well as online reading. This helped in observing the reason for the sudden rise in their status in literature and works of art for about half a century following the Anglo-American war of 1812. Concerning the works of Irving, Cooper and Longfellow, the Native Indians figure very conspicuously in their works and the narratives evolve around them. On the contrary, in *The Scarlet letter* and *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, the Indian is rarely visible, yet important and this paradox makes the examining of the novels in detail an interesting task so as to understand the significance of the Native Indians in Hawthorne and Melville's works. Qualitative methodology is used for this purpose to conduct a brief textual analysis. The narrative

analysis done on *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick or The Whale* both classics of this period, gives the reader an understanding of the story of the novel as well as its characters and the importance of their roles in these works.

III. THE PROPULSION OF THE NATIVE INDIANS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The European explorers who discovered the Native Indians linked their perceptions and life to Primitivism, (Sanford 1961) a concept which ‘dreams of a paradise on earth that does or did prove that an alternative to the present age could exist....in a myth of lands lying far away to the west or long ago in the past whose citizens dwelt in an ideal(ized) landscape and gentle climate in harmony with nature and reason.’ (Berkhofer 1979) The Europeans, notably the French, fashioned the *bon sauvage* these lines of thought as well as on their belief that the American Indians had traits in common with the ancient people who were thought to have spent peaceful lives. This Noble Savage who was later baptized as the Noble American Indian served as a foil for European society and culture. The revolution in France, which influenced the European society, sounded the death knell for the Noble American Indian in Europe. On the contrary, following the American Revolution and for almost half a century beyond, the American Indian maintained a prominent place in American literature and Art. The main reason being the rise of cultural nationalism (Honour 1975) following the separation from the British empire after the war of 1812 and the second yet equally important reason being the advent of Romanticism to the United States. The birth of a fledgling nation meant it needed to establish its own identity, one quite distinct from its colonizer in every sphere including literature and art.

Spencer (1957) states that this quest for pure American material resulted in the American forests and the Indians being chosen as indigenous subjects to promote literary independence. The reason being that they were unique to the United States. Although these elements were unanimously opted for as markers of difference, they were unable to integrate American literature and art because the neo-classical perspective of the time, deemed them unworthy of literary and artistic respect. With the arrival of Romanticism, where emotion and intuition were of crucial importance, ‘The romantic writers and artists sought to evoke feeling and sentiment in their readers or viewers throughout the whole range of emotions.’ (Berkhofer 1979) Indeed, emotions being in abundance in the nature and behaviour of the Native Indian, this made him a distinctive candidate for a unique place in American literature. Therefore, in the United States around this time with its ‘emphasis on indigenous traditions, folk customs, and the glorification of the national past [which] dovetailed with the drive toward cultural nationalism in the newly independent nation’ (Berkhofer 1979) the Native American Indian was propelled to the forefront of American literature and art although this status was short lived.

IV. DISCUSSION

Among the fiction writers of the first half of the 19th century, Washington Irving figures among the first American writers who drew positive and often romanticized portrayals, which could be even considered as a strong defense of Native Americans. *Phillip of Pokanoket: An Indian Memoir* was one of his works published in 1819, the very title of the book itself, denotes that it is solely dedicated to the Native Indians. *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), *Astoria* (1836) and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (1837), his subsequent works, all of them travel narratives, were written on his return to America following a seventeen-year stint abroad as a diplomat. His narratives were refreshing as they incorporated his literary experience gained abroad which explicitly indicated his sharp imaginative skills. Irving’s works were an unambiguous presentation of the Native Indians. James Fenimore Cooper, another renowned writer of the period being considered, authored *The Leather stocking Tales*, a famous series of romances, which include *The Pioneers, or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (1826), *The Prairie; A Tale* (1827), *The Pathfinder: or, The Inland Sea* (1840) and *The Deerslayer: or, The First War-Path* (1841), in them, the author exposes the Native Indian characters very explicitly. Concerning these works where in which the Native Indians are overtly present, it goes without a saying that the Natives played an important role in the literary works of the first half of the 19th century. Natty Bumppo, whose tribal life is illustrated by Cooper, is the protagonist of *The Leather Stocking Tales* and he is considered as the first indigenous American hero in American literature. Irving and Cooper, both writers who lived by their writing, would have made the choice of basing their works on Native Indians because such a choice of subject would have been profitable owing to the Native Indians riding on the crest of a wave of literary popularity.

Concerning American verse, A Brahmin poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* published in 1855 is an epic poem which speaks of the Objiwe people of the Lake Superior region and focuses specially on the life of Hiawatha a young Objiwe warrior. The poem explains about his brave deeds and his tragic love story with Minnehaha, a young Dakota woman. Here again, a Native American and a whole indigenous community is focused upon, proving the trend of the period which gave prominence to Native Indians as they were the symbols of nationalism and writing on them enhanced the value of literary works and hence the reputation of the writer be it verse or prose.

The works discussed so far, shed direct light mainly on the Native Americans. On the contrary, it could also be deduced that even the obscurity or the rare appearances of the Native Indians as observed in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick or The Whale* too, could prove the significance of Native Indians in literature. To illustrate how the insignificant turns out to be significant, an insight into *The Scarlet Letter* and

Moby Dick or The Whale is required. *The Scarlet Letter* being written from an omniscient third-person perspective in which the narrator describes the thoughts and feeling of the main characters as well as the general sentiments of the townspeople, shows how the characters function in their larger community. Since the characters are often reserved and secretive, the narrator's commentary on what they experience internally at any given time is very important to the unfolding of the story and the shaping of the reader's perception. After the initial framing device of the introduction, told from the point of view of two hundred years following the taking place of events in a Puritan context, the entire story is told as a fictionalized re-creation of happenings.

The novel being a deep expression of the passion of the main characters, Hester Prynne, the Reverend Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth all caught up in a love triangle, this mode of a third person omniscient narrator's unlimited point of view is very appropriate to demonstrate all facets of these characters and the opinions that all the other characters have formed about them. The author uses this tool to its fullest when according to Heath, "he speaks in several voices -Puritan, Victorian, Tragic, Subversive, etc." (Heath 1995) with the ultimate goal of revealing this emotionally laden story, which is that of Hester Prynne, a young European woman who marries an elderly scholar, crosses the Atlantic and lands in New England intending to found a family in this new land when her husband arrives from Europe. Following a long and vain wait for him, she is attracted to a young pastor, and accused of having committed adultery with him, resulting in Pearl, a daughter. Condemned and disgraced in public for her act, the novel evolves around the life story of Hester, who is obliged to perpetually wear the red-letter 'A' which is supposed to stand for adultery, on her bosom.

Examination of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals the presence of the Indians which seems few and far between. Hence, they do not play a major role in the text. The author does not judge them and he 'refers to them throughout the novel in their stereotypical role of outcast, heathen, healer or romanticized dweller of the primordial forest' (Eaton *et al.*, n.d.) At each entrance of the Native Indians, the reader is enlightened more about them.

During Hester Prynne's exposure to the public, for the so called crime she had committed, Hawthorne says 'An Indian in his native garb was standing there; but the red men were not so infrequent visitors of the English settlements' (Hawthorne, 1994, p 51) the external appearance of the Natives and their relation to the Puritan society is illustrated here.

The narrator wondering why a crowd has gathered in the square renowned for public punishment in the marketplace, guesses that it could be for the purpose of chasing back to the forest, 'an idle and vagrant Indian whom the white man's firewater had made riotous about the streets

(Hawthorne, 1994, p 42). In no way does Hawthorne try to conceal the colonizer's vices nor the fact of it having been transmitted to the Natives and their resulting addiction to alcohol. This drunkenness of the Native Indians was observed quite some time ago even by Nicholas Noyes (1698).

The Native Indians are not necessarily simpletons, their knowhow is exposed when Roger Chillingworth while trying to administer some medicine to Hester, admits "but I have learned many new secrets in the wilderness, and here is one of them – a recipe that an Indian taught me, in requital for some lessons of my own, that were as old as Paracelsus...."(Hawthorne, 1994, p 62) exemplifying thus, that some of the Natives are on par with the White Anglo-Saxons which, therefore, enables an exchange of knowledge.

Further on, towards the end of the novel, the author says that Pearl 'ran and looked the wild Indian in the face' (Hawthorne, 1994, p 208) when he had come to witness the procession. The adjective 'wild' implies that the Indian was part and parcel of the wilderness. This idea is reinforced when it is said that the curious Indians approached Hester 'gliding through the crowd, fastened their snakelike black eyes on Hester's bosom, conceiving, perhaps, that the wearer of this brilliantly embroidered badge must needs be a personage of high dignity amongst her people' (Hawthorne, 1994, p208). The comparison of the Indians to the snakes in appearance and movement makes them one with the wilderness, their abode. In addition, it could be assumed that Hawthorne wished to exhibit their naiveness and innocence because they seemed to believe that the downtrodden and disgraced Hester was an important personality in society.

Considering the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* the inclusion of the Native seems unnecessary in the development of the story. During certain instances the Native Indians and their society could stand as a foil to that of the Puritans, but this does not really seem essential or relevant to the story line. One understands that the natives are an adjunct to the story but then the question arises as to why a brilliant author incorporated the natives into a classic of American literature where they are not really required. This being the period where the Native Indians were at the pinnacle of their glory as singular representatives of a national cultural heritage, it is quite possible that Hawthorne would have surmised that excluding them from his work would dilute the status of his novel. Hence, to be on par with the literary norms of the period he felt it necessary to include the Native Indian image in his work. The very action of the author, of embedding the Native Indian into his classic, focusses the importance of the Native Indians in American literature during the period leading to the stabilization of nationalism and all this throughout the Romantic era.

Regarding Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick or The Whale* published in 1851, it is the story of a whaling expedition on

the Pequod related by a first-person narrator called Ishmael. Who in the opening lines of the novel introduces himself by saying, "Call me Ishmael." (Melville, 1992, p3) This story is in a certain way different from the normal whale quests popular among the reading public at that time because *Moby Dick or The Whale* is in fact an obsessive quest for revenge by the captain of the vessel Ahab, to kill the specific whale who destroyed his leg and maimed him. Finally, the whole crew meets with its Waterloo in this mad pursuit of revenge when the whale destroys the ship. Amid a story of hardship, beauty, and madness, the reader encounters several characters, many of whom have names with a religious significance. A harpooner, Tashtego is a Gay Head Native American from Martha's Vineyard. He is under the command of Stubb the second mate of the ship. Tashtego being quite insignificant in the story line, makes one wonder why Melville introduced him? Was it to give an air of multiculturalism to the crew or was it to include an important literary element of the period which could heighten the value of his work and make it more popular hence more marketable?

V. CONCLUSION

The words: decimation, disrespect, expropriation, exploitation and manipulation have become quite commonplace when describing the life and history of the Native Indians subsequent to their meeting with the European explorers who ended up as usurpers of their land. The sudden prestige bestowed upon the Native Indians after the American war against the British in 1812 was a 'not that I love Caesar less but that I love Rome more' strategy. The Native Indians being unique to the United States they were declared a national symbol for the sole purpose of distinguishing American writing and art from that of the Old Continent. This change in status did not in any way alter the real-life conditions of the Native Indians for the better. It in fact, was for the worse because ironically, the 'Trail of Tears' too took place during this time. Towards the final few decades of the 19th century, once American writing was established internationally, the importance of the Native Indians in American literature waned. The significance of using their image did not benefit the American Native

Indians as a group of people in any special manner. They were purely and simply manipulated in the whole process so that American works of literature could distinguish themselves from those of other continents. Thus, revealing another egoistic move of the White Anglo-Saxon rulers.

In conclusion, though pessimistic, it could be imagined that the Native American Indians will continue, as the oppressed 'Other' in the United States for generations to come, as they missed to make use of a great opportunity which lasted for almost half a century from 1812 onwards, to improve their conditions. I believe they were unable to make use of this 'thrust to fame', situation because the submissiveness imposed on them, by the political leaders from day one, made them reticent and hence, voiceless, and powerless to come forward and negotiate terms for redressing their conditions.

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