

The Othered Indian, Culture Appropriation, and Formation of National Identity in *The Last of the Mohicans*

SONG Maoru^{[a],*}

^[a]College of International Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 12 April 2016; accepted 9 June 2016

Published online 26 July 2016

Abstract

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper renders some truthful historical events, and also presents some romantic creation. Under the pen of Cooper, the native Indian are deprived of the historical visage. The deprivation is an othering process in order to establish the superiority of the white, a kind of the white's colonizing strategy. Along with the othering process, the white undergo the process of cultural appropriation. In the contact with the Indian, the white unconsciously and slowly assimilate the Indian's skills and wisdom for a better adaptation in the unfamiliar world. Therefore, the novel essentially reveals the white's contradictory attitudes towards the native tribes. On the one hand, as the more civilized group, the white consciously differentiate themselves from the native, and tried to build their superiority. On the other hand, the wisdom and culture of the Indian are beneficial for the white's adaptation in North America, and the Indian's tradition and qualities are more or less admired by these out-comers. Behind the contradictory attitudes toward the native lies the white's ambition to establish a new national identity centered on the white group.

Key words: *The Last of the Mohicans*; Othering; Culture appropriation; National identity; Romantic creation

Song, M. R. (2016). The Othered Indian, Culture Appropriation, and Formation of National Identity in *The Last of the Mohicans*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 12(7), 28-33. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/8628>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8628>

INTRODUCTION

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) has enjoyed a high reputation for his *Leatherstocking Tales* describing the frontier scenery of the early America. Cooper is regarded as "American Scott"¹, for the adaption and modification for an American context of the historical romance which Water Scott had employed to perform the work of British nation-formation (Shields, 2009, p.2). The historical romance² similarly works as a significant genre in Cooper's literary creation.

In addition, Cooper once claims in the book's introduction "the business of a writer of fiction is to approach, as near as his power will allow, to poetry." (Cooper, 2014, p.7) Here, approaching to poetry refers to romantic embellishment in realistic depiction. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, although Cooper in his novel presents the American history, for example, the historical events of the Fort William Henry massacre and Indian war which are truthfully involved in the novel, he also undertakes a romantic creation. In Cooper's novels, romance, contrary to realism, is "an ideological apparatus which serves to displace the historical culpability of the culture of the writer." (Nelson, 1992, p.39) The displacement of history is a way of rewriting of history, so that the people in the past are reshaped under "culture of the writer". In other words, the natives are undergoing a reshaping process. This kind of reshaping process shares affinity of the othering process, through which the superiority and authority of the white can be established. However,

¹ The connection between Cooper and Scott has often been discussed, especially in terms of historical romance. See Dekker G. (1967). *James Fenimore Cooper: The American Scott*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

² For further discussion of Historical Romance and the tradition of American Historical Romance, see Dekker G. (1987). *The American Historical Romance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Hughes, H. (1993). *The Historical Romance*. London: Routledge.

this novel is not a traditional colonizing literary work. Along with the othering process, the white show their appreciation towards the Indian and the Indian culture. This paper aims at revealing the new characteristics of the reshaped natives to reveal the white's contradictory attitudes toward the native, and finding out their ambition behind contradictory attitudes.

1. THE HISTORICAL REALITY AND ROMANTIC CREATION

Historical romance, with its links with both "history" and the novel, is a genre in which two systems of myth operate (Hughes, 1993, p.13). *The Last of the Mohicans* does not only involve some historical events, but also some author's innovative creation. This creation belongs to that part of "the novel", the author's romantic imagination. Under the author's imagination, different attitudes toward the white and the Indian can be noticed.

Cooper sets the historical background of *The Last of the Mohicans* in the early stage of the American formation. The geographical location of the story is in the west of America, where France and England were in the Seven Years War, lasting from 1756 to 1763. Almost all the European powers were drawn into this conflict. British and French mostly fought for land on the North American Frontier. The frontier is just "like the nightmare landscape of the rational and irrational, natural and supernatural, seem to have given way." (Butler, 1976, p.118) In this world, the Indian tribes are also complicatedly involved, and exert their influence on the tendency of the war. Different groups of the native Indian ally with the two opposite parts:

Many American Indian groups allied with the French because they wanted to push British settlers off their lands. These included Algonquian-speaking tribes in New England and Canada; various American Indians living in the Ohio Valley, such as the Delaware and the Shawnee; the Chippewa; the Ottawa; and some Mohawks in Canada. Some of the Iroquois nations, which considered the Algonquian speakers to be enemies, allied with the British. (Marczely, 2015, p.18)

It can be noticed that the Seven Years War on the one hand is the confrontation between Britain and France. On the other hand, since the location of this war lies on the frontier of the North America, a place far away from city, and civilization, in this barbarous place the civilized white group and the opposite uncivilized native group forms another confrontation. In the novel, Cooper shows vividly the event of the Fort William Henry massacre, and highlights the savage and cruelty of the native. Furthermore, in the America history, there were series of wars between Indians and non-Indians early before this event.

There was the Tuscarora War of 1711-1712, the Yamasee war of 1715-1716, and the final defeat of the Natchez in 1731, besides similar wars between Indians and non-Indians took place in

Florida in 1703, when north-coast Apalachee towns were destroyed, many Apalachee were killed, and many more were sold as slaves. (Thornton, 1987, p.86)

As a matter of fact, even more serious is the confrontation between the white and the Indian than the tension of the two opposite white groups. In addition, the two confrontations are intricately intertwined. As the more civilized group, both the British and the French consciously and unconsciously differentiates themselves from those barbarous groups. However, both of them try to ally with the native out of a better familiarity with this land. Under this condition, the white group has a contradictory attitude toward to the native, who are pragmatically beneficial and emotionally being excluded. As a matter of fact, the contradictory attitude toward the native is not merely reflected in terms of practical utility, and similarly is revealed in terms of the Indian culture, which will be discussed later. Cooper's novel, just as a historical record, vividly exposes this two confrontations. The general background of the story is the war between Britain and France. Nevertheless, the plot is mostly concerned with the confrontation between the white and the Indian. Furthermore, this novel especially reveals the characteristics of different groups of the Indian. Therefore, Cooper's novel can be more or less regarded as a historical chronicle of the North America, which presents the scenery of the frontier in the 18th century.

From the perspective of narration, the whole story is presented from the white's standpoint, hence the most apparent characteristics of the native, partly because of language barrier, is silence. Under this narration, the author gives the white priority and superiority over the native in terms of the power of discourse, which can be identified in the description of the Fort William Henry massacre, extremely highlighting the savage and cruelty of the native. However, the novel fails to mention series of wars between Indians and non-Indians early before that time. This intentional or unintentional neglect of Indian tragic history gives the priority to the white. The selective presentation of history reaches the aim of rewriting of history. In this creation, the cruelty of Indians is foregrounded, while the whites with blood hands prove to be innocent.

In the novel, the white enjoys superiority unconditionally. Magua, notorious for his cruelty, desperately revenges against the British general for he had been ill-treated. Compared with his revenge, the narration of his early suffering is weakened. As a Huron chief, he "was tied up before all the pale-faced warriors, and whipped like a dog." Magua accused Munro's fault, resulting from his humiliation in front of the white people. As the tribe's chief, Magua is not as an isolated individual, but as the representative of the native tribe, His humiliation hence reveals the Indians' inferior social status. His passionate and irrational revenge originates

from the harm on his pride, an attempt to break the superiority of the white. However, faced with Magua's humiliation, Cora keeps silent, and tries to find an excuse that "an Indian warrior was patient, and that his spirit felt not and knew not the pain his body suffered." (p.122) Cora is embodied with rational reason in the novel, and is capable of moral judgment under the extreme situation. In front of Magua's powerful accusation, her silence and hesitation indicates her acquiescence of his father's former fault. Her attempt to find "a manner suit the comprehension of an Indian" reveals the obstacle in the mutual understanding between the white and the Indian as well as the intellectual superiority of the white. Furthermore, in order for her father's innocence, she acknowledges that it is reasonable for Indian to suffer misfortune and torture so that she holds that "an Indian warrior was patient" and insisted an Indian should "forgive an injury". Cora, as a rational spokesman of the white, claims that the suffering of the Indian can be neglected, while the fault of the white should be forgiven unconditionally.

There are other evidences in the novel to prove the bias in narration to reveal that the white are more civilized and the Indians were cruel savages. In the description of the Fort of William Henry massacre, more attention is paid to the process and the horrible scene of massacre, revealing the Indian's cannibal nature. However, little accusation is given to French. In fact, their lack of restriction of the Indian was partly reason of massacre.

Therefore, Cooper's novel not just negatively records what happened in the past. He tries to create a frontier myth under romantic imagination. The bias in the narration reveals that Cooper romantically delineates a new history of "his culture". In essence, his culture originates from the Puritan tradition.

As for those American historical romances which are concerned with the seventeenth-century Puritans, their premise is that colonizing New England was essentially a alternative to fighting a civil war in old England; that imperialism and revolution were but different phases or expressions of the same progressive middle-class energy and continued to be so down to the time of the American Revolution. (Dekker, 1987, p.41)

The native, viewed from the perspective of the white, are distorted and re-created in the novel, complying with the colonizing tradition. Cooper selectively presents a period of history unfavorable to Indians. Their savageness is fore grounded and their identity as being repressed is neglected. Therefore, the historical truth is deprived, and the Indian is reshaped for the profit of the white in this novel. But it should be noticed that the Indians are greatly helpful for the white group both in the Seven Years war and the colonization of the North America. Therefore, the white's attitude toward the Indian is a more complicate matter.

2. THE OTHERED INDIAN AND THE WHITE'S AUTHORITY

Cooper distorts the original visage of the Indian group. In the novel, although the white have sharply different attitudes towards the Huron and the Mohicans, the uncivilization of the natives is fore grounded. The conflict between the white and the native is even more prominent and sharper than that between the opposite white groups in this war.

As for the distortion and romantic creation of the natives, Nelson thinks that this reshaping is a process of othering to show the white's domination on the North American land, and the white's curiosity on the Indian is not for humanistic purposes, but as a means of power. (p.45) The othering process aims at establishing and authorizing the superiority of the white over the native. As for the mechanism of othering, Pratt summarizes that:

The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective "they" which is distilled even further into an iconic "he" (the standard adult male specimen). The abstracted "he/they" is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything "he" is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of pre-given custom or trait.... (qtd. in Nelson, 1993, p.45)

A timeless present tense refers to a presentation of an iconic "he" void of historic condition and separated from history. And the pre-given custom or trait is under the control of the culture of "the author". The othered people undergo a romantic reshaping process lacking the historic authority. In the novel, the native undergo a re-creating process, and loses the historical sense. Their uncivilization, especially cruelty, is extremely revealed. Therefore, the Indian are experiencing an othering process. There is no doubt, as a chief of Indian tribe, Magua acts as a collective "he". In the novel, Magua is a cunning, dangerous, merciless character, and his savageness and cruelty are amplified. Thereafter, his specific identity leads to the recognition that the Huron tribe may share the same characteristics with him.

Not only the Indian people, the Indian tradition and custom are also othered in the novel, the Indian culture is not embodied in a single iconic "he", but in a collective "they", an uncivilized group, including both noble Indian and merciless Indian. The savage Indian are directly presented through the role of Magua. As for the noble Indian, Chingachgook can be regarded as a single iconic "he". Although he is greatly admired and praised by the white, when he killed the French soldier, the scout muttered: "T'would have been a cruel and unhuman act for a white-skin; but 'tis the gift and natur' of an Indian, and I suppose it should not be denied." (p.166) Even the noble Indian in the eyes of the white, cannot get rid of the instinct or nature of cruelty and inhumanity. Both the savage and the noble Indian are absolutely differentiated and excluded from the white groups out of their instinct.

The background of the novel's second part is in the native tribes so that original culture is seemingly presented. In the novel, the Indian tradition brings a great shock to the white out-comers. When Duncan tries to rescue the two sisters in the native's tribe, he is greatly surprised by the behaviors of the native.

When at then distance of a few hundred feet from the lodges, the newly arrived warrior halted. Their plaintive and terrific cry, which was intended to triumph of the victors, had entirely ceased. One of their numbers now called not more intelligible to those for whose ears they were intended than their expressive yells. It would be difficult to convey a suitable idea of the savage ecstasy with which the news, thus imparted, was received. The whole encampment, in a moment, became a scene of the most violent bustle and commotion (p.288).

The surprise of Duncan results from his incapability of understanding and accepting the Indian's behaviors and their unfamiliar lifestyle. In addition, the "plaintive and terrific cry", "the savage ecstasy" and "a scene of the most violent bustle and commotion" worsens the unfamiliar condition. These are signs of threatening other than unfamiliar ones so that Duncan "would have retreated" in this insecure condition.

Through the presentation of the othered iconic "he" or collective "they", both the Indian people and Indian culture are located in an inferior state, and the white enjoy the superiority. In the second part of the novel, the uncivilization enlarges from the individual Magua to the whole group. The horrible scene of Indian gathering also reveals their savageness. The lifestyle and custom bring a great shock on the white, indicating the great distinction between the Indian and the white. Moreover, Indian's savageness and cruelty bring themselves as unsafe to the white. The native are something of danger, and unfamiliarity. The othering process gives the role of the Indian as enemy, thereby resulting in a hostile confrontation between the Indian and the white. The final defeat of Magua renders the imperialistic ambition of the white to establish authority on this land, and bring the unfamiliar under their control.

The figure of the two Mohicans, as the pure natives, makes Cooper's novel different from other colonizing novels. The two Mohicans accompany with the white all the way and the young warrior even sacrifices his life for rescuing Cora. Their wisdom and skill are greatly commended and appreciated by the white. In the second part of the novel, when the group tries to find the trail of Magua, with his distinct nature, Uncas firstly locates the spot. His talents win great appreciation from Hawk-eyes and Duncan. As the pure native, the young Mohican is endowed with skills beyond the ordinary, and his long silence shows his rational mind as well as virtuous qualities, different from Magua. In addition, his bidding for his father reveals his good manner.

However, even for the noble Mohicans, the Indian instinct cannot be erased, and the great difference cannot be elided in the white's memory. Hawk-eye works as spokesman of the author, Cooper's thought can be noticed in Hawk-eye's word and action. In chapter three, when Hawk-eye discussed with Chingachgook about the Mohicans' history, although he was convinced by the old Mohican's words, still he said "there is reason in an Indian, though nature has made him with a red skin!" (p.31). Furthermore, Duncan's silence at the time of Uncas going to be executed evidently proves that the white are never engaged in treating the Mohicans as their members. Therefore, the contradictory attitudes towards the noble Indians can be noticed. Behind this contradiction lies Cooper intends to elide the tension between the white and the native, and moralizes the establishment of the white's authority on this land by singing a woeful elegy which brought an aesthetic beauty³.

Both the savage and noble Indians experience an othering process in the novel. They clearly differentiate from the white so that the authority of the white is established. For further understanding of the othering process, it should be noticed that the native not only is othered or alienated from the white, but also experiences the deprivation from their skills, customs.

In the novel, the prominent characteristic of Magua is cruelty and savageness, while his being repressed is unimportant. His cruelty and savageness for the white are unsafe, just like the unfamiliar wildness. Actually, the othered Magua and his tribe can be treated as the collective "they" of the unfamiliar wildness.

The cavalcade had not long passed before the branches of the bushes that formed the thicket were cautiously moved asunder, and a human visage, as fiercely wild as savage aer and unbridled passions could make it, peered out on the retiring footsteps of the travelers. (p.27)

Therefore, the assailment from the white on Magua cannot be regarded as mere attack on the Indian, but also on the wildness. From the standpoint of the white, this assailment is a laudable fighting to conquer an unfamiliar and dangerous world.

Although the Mohicans receives appreciation from the white, the final death of Uncas, leaving the old Mohicans lonely, indicates even the noble Indian cannot survive in the world of the white. All the native tribes, beyond moral evaluation, are doomed to perish. However, their noble qualities, wisdom and skills surprisingly remain in the novel. In the narration of the novel, without the violent intervene from the white, even the noble Indian alienates themselves from their custom, wisdom, and

³ Some critics think Cooper incorporates Burke's idea of beauty in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and the sublime and the beautiful can be felt. See Blakemore, S. (1997). "Without a cross": The cultural significance of the sublime and beautiful in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 52(1), 27-57.

skills. Accompanying with the Mohicans brings learning opportunity for the white, and all the white in this group are influenced by the Mohicans consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, in the othering process, the white have unconsciously adsorbed the native custom, wisdom, and skills of how to survive in this land.

In the othering process, the natives are separated themselves from their own tradition. Magua and his tribe stand out more as a savage group than a native tribe. The Mohican's misery destiny indicates the similarly alienation. Their virtuous qualities and their tradition are unnoticeably alienated and ingeniously remained by the white group while Uncas' death indicates perish of the noble tribe.

3. CULTURE APPROPRIATION AND THE ENSTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL INDENTITY

Through the othering process, the identity of the native is fixed as the inferior. This process aims at establishing the authority of the white, and consolidates a national identity. In the novel, along with the decline of the native tribe, a new national identity which centers on the white, and combines the authority of the white and the culture of the native gradually comes into being.

As the newcomers on this land, the white's wisdom and skill of living on this foreign land full of threats are greatly lacking compared with that of the native. Therefore, the white attempt to "adapt to new and often threatening environments by adopting the traits and resources of other cultural group." (Shields, 2009, p.139) Through Cooper's narration, the native are othered from their culture and tradition, well acquired later by the white group. This process, in fact, is the culture appropriation.

In the war between Britain and France, and the fighting with the Huron tribe, all the white group members are influenced by the native wisdom and skills, and even put them in to practice. In rescuing the sister, in order to enter the native village much easier, Duncan is persuaded by Hawk-eye to let to Uncas to draw "the fantastic shadow that the natives were accustomed to consider as the evidence of a friendly and jocular disposition." (p.278) The disguise in an Indian way is of help for Duncan in cheating the native. Other white members are similarly influenced by the Indian skills. Even the old Munro, in the final fighting, fights with his hand, a Mohican way, instead of gun. Therefore, the culture appropriation is undergoing unspectacularly and slowly along with the native's othering process. In this narration the white is free from the accusation of colonizing the native and they do not take responsibility for perish of the Indian tribes. Furthermore, faced with the tragic ending of the Mochican, the white shows their sympathy. The name of the novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, similarly reveals

that the novel was an elegy of the native Indian. This kind of sympathy is the way to moralize the white's culture appropriation.

In the novel, the outstanding learner, without any doubt, is Hawk-eye. He is one member of the white in terms of blood lineage, while he grew up under the Indian environment. His long acquaintance with the Indian brings abundant knowledge of wildness. He is indeed "a product of both worlds and was as much a racial mixture, symbolically, as Cora is naturally." (Mills, 1986, p.444) In his figure, an ideal American individual, a combination of the identity of the white and the Indian culture, can be noticed. In the novel, he identifies himself as "a man without a cross" referring that he insisted his purity of blood line. He regards himself as a member of the white. As for the Indian tradition, "In all matters skill and outward culture, he has adapted to Indian ways, and this allows him to be the most effective of the white warriors." (Slotkin, 1998, p.91) Therefore, in the othering process, the white have unconsciously adsorbed the native custom, wisdom, and skills of how to survive in this land. The culture appropriation facilitates the formation of a new identity⁴ represented by Hawk-eye.

Cooper lives at the time when the young America was in early development. As for a young nation, the historical memory is essential to identify himself. Pearce summarizes that "the American before 1850-a new man[sic], as he felt, making a new world-was obsessed to know who and what he was and where he was going, to evaluate the special society in which he lived and to know its past and its future" (qtd. in Nelson, 1992, p.54). *The Last of the Mohicans*, as a historical romance, shows Cooper's effort to romantically create American history.

Although the war between Britain and France works as the setting of the story, the conflict between the white and the native is more prominent. The geographical location is the frontier of the North America, the border between the white and the Indian. No matter who would succeed the war of these two countries, the white group is the winner, for the native tribes are gradually colonized. In this way, the white expand the boundary slowly. Actually, expanding the boundary and conquering the uncivilized Indian are an essential aspect of a national identity. The colonization of the white on the land is moralized and the domination of the white is authorized. Milder thinks that the novel "focuses upon America just at the moment when it is beginning to be America, yet its dominant mood is one of loss, not celebration." (p.408) The culture appropriation assists the formation of America centered around the white, at the expense of the native's misery destiny.

The culture appropriation of the white endows

⁴ On the identity of the new nation, see Crain, C. (2001). *American sympathy: Men, friendship, and literature in the new nation*. Yale: Yale University Press.

the national identity with rich content. Acquisition of the native's culture differentiates the American white themselves from the white in Europe. Consequently, the national identity, a combination of the cultures of white and the Indian is in formation.

CONCLUSION

As one of the pioneers in American literature, Cooper devotes himself in literary creation full of American characteristics. One of his aims is to present the American history. However, this American history is not truthfully recorded, but is romantically created. Cooper acts as one who "held up the mirror in which several generations of Americans see the image of themselves they most wished to see." (Miller, 1955, p.450) Therefore, the American history under Cooper's pen is influenced by his romantic imaginary, and the historical romance is great beneficial for his creation of the history. *The Last of the Mohicans* presents the historical events in the Seven Years War. The novel does not negatively record what happened in the past. It deeply reveals the conflict between the Indian and the white. Cooper presents the story from the perspective of the white, under his narration, the native Indian undergo an othering process. The uncivilization of the native is foregrounded. The cruelty, cunningness, and ruthlessness of the savage group are more prominent than their bitter suffering from the white. Even to the noble Indian, the Mohicans, they cannot get rid of the savage behaviors out of their instinct. Through the othering process, the white enjoys the superior status and their authority on this land was established.

The othering process clarifies the border between the white and the Indian, and also results the alienation between the native and their culture. The death of Uncas indicates the doom of the native tribes. However, their wisdom, skills in living on the land are acquired by the white. Therefore, the Indian alienated themselves from their culture and tradition. The acquisition of the native's culture in essence is the culture appropriation for the white group. They adapt culture of the native in order for a better living on this land. Hawk-eye is the most obvious

example. He identifies himself as a white, while what he learns from the Indian ensures him as an efficient warrior. Through the othering process and culture appropriation, the authority of the white is established and a national identity is formed. Different from that of the Europe, this identity is of a greatly combination of the white authority and the Indian's culture.

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