

Indian Portrayals in American Literature

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the image of Indians depicted in selected works of American literature to achieve the expected results. Indians play a significant role in American literature. Indians can be seen in a variety of artworks as different types of images. Native Americans who grew up in the United States and led ideal lives in the country's hills, surrounded by nature, have a special position in literature. This is especially true of their presence in literary works. Indians were infrequently portrayed in literature produced before the 19th century, and those works often portrayed them as savage, violent characters. In contrast, Indians are portrayed as more noble in literature written after the 19th century. Positive Indian characters in Longfellow's poem The Song of Hiawatha, Jackson's novel Ramona, Fenimore Cooper's The Wept of Wish-ton-wish and Washington Irving's A Tour on the Prairies are studied through the work. This article examines the role of Indians in American literature, the writers' relationship to Indians, and how Indian images are perceived by readers.

Keywords: American literature, bad Indians, complicated character, good Indians, Indian character

1. INTRODUCTION

When we study American literature, we see different types of Indian images in numerous literary works. They have been discovered in every way since the indigenous landowners discovered on American soil were given the name of Indians. In literature, especially in films, photographs, stories, poems and

novels, we can see Indian images formed in various forms. The fact that positive Indian images, negative Indian images, or complex Indian images that incorporate both are at the center of many works of art is proof of our word. Indians are depicted in literature as loyal friends, loyal spouses, patriotic people, and also as vengeful people. It should also be noted that Indians appear in many negative images in literature before the 19th century, on the other hand positive Indians can be seen in many works which are written after the 19th century.

Indian characters such as Hiawatha, Tashtego, Conancho, Joy Pollis, Pacahontus, Metamora are the most famous and beloved Indian characters in American literature, and the works featuring them never lose their popularity among readers. Also, most of the Indian images before 1800 were fictions, while in later periods, Indians appeared in semi-scientific, religious and philosophical works. In the 19th century, Indians became in the center of literary genres such as poetry, drama, story, novel (Black and Weidman 1976:10-11). By the 19th century, writers were not limited to fictional Indian images, but also visited the places where Indians lived and created Indian images based on real facts. Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Helen Hunt Jackson are among the writers who visited Indian places, and their Hindu images were created based on real life events.

2. *THE SONG OF HIAWATHA* BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

The name of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) always stands first among the poets who glorified the Indians. His poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) is considered to be the masterpiece of the poet in which Indians are praised. This poem brought great fame to the poet. The fact that he made the red-skinned Indians a favourite image in this poem shows the kindness and nobility of the poet's nature (Keiser 1970:190). Longfellow had a great interest in Indians from his youth. The poet got his first knowledge about Indians from the historian Hekivelder's book *Account of the History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations of Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States* (1818). The

poet Longfellow describes his *The Song of Hiawatha* as an "Indian song" or "legendary hero's story" sent to support the American Indians. Hiawatha is a character in an epic poem who teaches and guides a tribe of Indians to perfection. Also, the hero Hiawatha calls the Indians for unity in the following verses:

All your strength is in your union,
All your danger is in discord. (Keiser 1970:200)

The Song of Hiawatha has received a lot of praise from literary critics. Historian George Bancroft (1800-1891) says that the image of the innocent child in Indian life is very well described in the poem. Also, Bancroft believes that the Indians keep animals and nature as their close friends, which is paid high attention in the poem (Trachtenberg 2004: 66). American poet T. W. Parsons (1819-1892) also writes that he enjoyed the carefree and carefree Indian children running in the western forests, their simple but happy way of life (Longfellow 1887:296). Critics also note that the poet's description of the nature of the Indian abode in the poem is noteworthy. In this regard, it is said that the poet Longfellow is recognized for his ability to describe the sounds of inanimate objects in nature, to know the language of birds, to understand the rustle of the wind blowing through the leaves, and to be able to translate the sound of flowing water. Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* is the longest and most successful epic poem ever written about Indians in American literature. This song became an instant hit with readers and sold more than four hundred thousand copies since its first release. But the popularity of this work is not in its unprecedented success, but in the author's approach to Indians and the creation of the image of noble Indians (Somers 2017: 81). This poem reminded modern students living in a rapidly developing society, reading about Indians of the simple and natural life of America (Pisani 2005: 137).

3. *RAMONA* BY HELEN HUNT JACKSON

Another famous work enriched with Indian heroic images is the novel *Ramona* (1884) written by writer Helen Hunt Jackson

(1832-1885). The novel *Ramona* describes the love between Ramona, a Scottish half-Indian orphan girl, and Alexandro, an Indian boy, and the bitter fate of their marriage. The novel depicts the life of Indian tribes living in California. To write this novel, Helen Hunt Jackson visited the land of the Indian tribes in the spring of 1883 in order to study them. Romana's work was the artistic result of this visit (Keiser 1970: 250). Jackson fought for the rights of Indians throughout his life. He appealed to the government on this issue many times. In the novel *Ramona*, the Indian young man Alexandro is portrayed as honest, kind and generous. The writer calls on the American government to protect the rights of the Indians through the incident of Alexandro's murder by European immigrants. This novel became popular among readers, and even schools, streets and towns in America are named after the novel's female character, Ramona. The novel and the history of its writing are important. During the last six years of his life, Jackson wrote hundreds of letters to the government defending the rights of Indians. The novel *Ramona*, created a year before the writer's death, was one of the great works of the writer in the way of how much she cared for the Indians. (Strickland 2000:120).

The novel *Ramona* is based on real people, real places and real events. Jackson also mentioned that every story in *Ramona* is true (Fernandez 2020: 201). *Ramona*'s work became so famous that the flow of tourists to Southern California, where the events of the novel took place, increased (Stevens 1998: 161). As Jackson expected, his novel became a rallying cry for Indians. The work brought Native American Indians into the spotlight. In the play, the character of Ramona is portrayed as a beautiful and faithful woman, while Alexandro, who has full Indian blood in his body, was shown to be able to read and play the violin. Also, Alexandra was respected among her fellow tribesmen due to his human qualities such as faith and kindness. The unique landscape of Southern California served as a unique place for these two Indian characters and their love story.

4. THE LEGEN *POCAHONTAS* BY CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH

One of the earliest and most important works of Indian literature is the legend of Pocahontas written by Captain John Smith (1580-1631). This legend later served as material for novels, poems and plays depicting Indians (Keiser 1977:1). Captain Smith's Legend of Pocahontas tells the story of the capture of the British Smith and his team by King Powhatan of the Virginia Indians and their rescue by Powhatan's daughter, Princess Pocahontas. The depiction of the Indian princess Pocahontas with the most wonderful qualities, the bonding of the Indians with the British visitors is reflected in the most beautiful images in this work. Although there has been much debate about whether the story of Captain Smith's rescue by the Indian queen was actually true, the popularity and importance of this work has not lost its influence in literature. Pocahontas remains one of the most famous Indian characters, even though King Father Powhatan was a more important figure in history than his beloved young daughter was. (Rountree2006). This means that literature and artistic works are incomparable for humanity. Indian poet, writer and Professor Paula Gun Allen (1939-2008), worked as the founder of the study of Indians from an Indian perspective. She noted that the Indian queen Pocahontas had several names, including Matooka as her real name, Amonute as her religious name, and Lady Rebecca as a Christian name given to her when he arrived in England, and finally, the name Pocahontas was his childhood nickname (Gun2003:18). American literary scholar Charles Larson characterizes Pocahontas as the first American female, forest child, the mother of all of us, the great mother of all Americans (Larson1978:24).

The legend of the Indian princess Pocahontas, which was written by Captain Smith for the first time, served as material for the works of other artists. American poet Hart Crane (1899-1932) in his epic poem "The Bridge" (1930) also reflects the legend of Pocahontas in a unique way (Kolisnychenko2019:35). Smith's romantic story of Pocahontas had a great influence on American literature. This work has become a favourite and recurring theme for writers addressing Indians.

5. *THE WEPT OF WISH-TON-WISH* BY JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

Another unique work written about Indians is James Fenimore Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-wish* (1829). In this play, the son of a famous Narragansett Indian tribe abducts a white girl, Russ, as a child. Rus returns to his family ten years later as a teenager. At that time, Rus is married to the young chieftain of the tribe, Conanchet, and on top of that, Rus cannot remember the memories of his youth. The word *wept* in the title of *Wish-ton-wish* refers to the grief, suffering, and tears of a Puritan family of Rus' over ten years in the process of finding their abducted daughter. (Keiser1970:108-109). In this work, the writer Cooper created a complex Indian image (Peprnik 2005:130). While Konanchet, a young indian man, steals Rus, and at first glance creates a negative impression on the reader, this image becomes positive due to the loyalty and love between Konanchet and Rus. In fact, Conanchet assumes that the Puritan family is dead and takes care of Russ and marries him. Through this work, Cooper tried to change the barbaric and evil views of Indians at that time in a positive way (Grossman 1949:69).

During the events of the play, Conanchet is killed by members of a hostile tribe. Rus, who could not stand it, goes mad for a while and dies. Conanchet and Rus's young son is raised by Rus's mother. The fact that Conanchet returned Rus and his son to Rus's family, and that Rus was ready to die with Conanchet, shows how genuine the bond between them is. Rus's mother felt an obstacle to show love to her half-Indian grandson, Conanchet's son, at first, but motherly love and respect for her daughter immediately removed this obstacle and she loved her grandson (Boyles 1977: 110-111).

Konanchet is included in the group of noble Indians with his bravery, loyalty and devotion to his family and wife, but he becomes a controversial figure with his actions in abducting Rus (Peprnik 2005: 131). According to Professor Skannavini of L'Aquile University in Italy, Cooper leaves the conclusion about Conanchet open to every reader. The marriage and love between Conanchet and Rus allegedly serves as a bond between

representatives of two worlds, white people and Indians (Skannavini 2011:5).

Intermarriage between Indians and whites appears in many 19th-century works, including Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824) and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) (Mitchell 1995:127). This situation is related to the measures to protect the rights of Indians and the improvement of social relations between Indians and white people.

6. *A TOUR ON THE PRAIRIES* BY WASHINGTON IRVING

A Tour on the Prairies (1835) written by the writer Washington Irving (1783-1859) is one of the masterpieces about Indians created based on the impressions of the writer's visit to the place of Indians. In the introduction to *A Tour on the Prairies*, Irving says that this book was written in response to the expectations of all readers from his one-month trip to the West in 1832 (Keiser 1970: 53).

In the first chapter of Irving's work, he describes the Pawnee and Comanche Indian tribes as warriors and revengers, and in the second chapter, he writes that a Creek Indian standing on a horse is remarkable, along with the wild landscape around him. The Osage Indians are the Indian tribe that left the most positive impression on Irving, and the writer often compares them to ancient Greek and Roman heroes in *A Tour on the Prairies*. The writer likens one of the Osaji Indians to an ancient Roman general. It is recognized that the position of the Indian on the galloping horse can be the most amazing work of art of artists (Niemeyer 2019: 11). Irving enthuses that the Osage are the most handsome Indians he has ever seen in the West, and particularly praises the beauty of their head shape, their gentle attitude, their unique gestures, and how free and liberated they are in their society (Keiser 1970: 54).

During his one-month trip, Irving believes that Indians are good people, and thinks that the negative images of Indians in fiction written up to that time are far from the truth. For example, in fiction about Indians, the image of emotionless people who neither laugh nor cry was common in works created before the

19th century. Irving emphasizes in his book *A Tour on the Prairies* that Indians have the ability to joke with each other, laugh, rejoice, and shed tears in the event of the death of a relative or friend, and that they feel the same emotions as all people (Keiser 1970: 54). In this work, Irving also mentions how much Indians believe in superstitions and makes his book more interesting with stories related to superstitions (Keiser 1970: 55). American professor scientist Kime R.W. analyzing the stories about Indians in Irving's *A tour on the Prairies*, says that with this work Irving discovered the West as a reality (Kime 1973:56).

According to Mikado, a Japanese researcher, the uniqueness of the flora and fauna of the western hills, the attitude of the Indians to them, and the hunting process had a great impact on the writer, and this, in turn, ensured the uniqueness of the work *A Tour on the Prairies* (Mikado 2019: 3).

In fact, Irving discovered the Indians as noble people due to his travels to places inhabited by Indians, he supported the Native Americans in front of his fellow expeditioners. Furthermore, *A Tour on the Prairies* served to convince the public of his views of the Indians, he tried to change the people's opinion of the existing barbarous Indians to noble brave Indians.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Indians are of great importance in American literature. Indians can be seen in various works of art in the form of various images. Native Indians who matured on American soil and lived a perfect life in the American hills, in the lap of nature, have their roles in literature, particularly, their place in novels is incomparable (Keiser 1970: 293). In the works written before the 19th century, Indians were rarely represented, and based on Indians, barbaric and bloodthirsty images were created, and in the literature created after the 19th century, we can see Indians as more noble people. How the image of Indians is depicted in works of art is mainly the result of the author's purpose and the effect of the writer's familiarity with Indians (Keiser 1970: 294). When we study the part of the literature related to the Indians, we see that in many cases the participation of the Indians in the

struggle for ownership of their land is reflected. In the works of many authors, Indians appear as heroes in the center of such struggles. These heroes show their heroism in conflict situations. Sometimes they show heroism in problematic situations with white people, and sometimes they stand in the center of the artwork with their heroism in conflicts between tribes. While the plot of the most famous poems and dramas about Indians is formed within the framework of historical figures, we can also see eternal fictional and pictorial Indian images in many prose works. The most important Indian tribes and the Indians living in different parts of America have taken the attention of writers. The Indians of New England and Virginia are among the Indians that have attracted artists the most. The Iroquois, Romans, Delawares, Algonquins, Sioquis, and other such tribes are represented in the genres of fiction, such as poetry, drama, and novel. Not only the Indians, but also the images of the places where they live, forests, nature, and the environment have enriched American literature. Indians continue to be studied both scientifically and artistically. Due to the globalization of literature, the image of Indians in fiction is being studied by literary scholars of the world. While Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is portrayed as a leader who calls his fellow tribesmen to unity, Helen Hunt Jackson portrays Romana as a faithful and devoted woman, Alexandra as an educated and religious Indian in her novel. Princess *Pokahontas*, as the first Indian character to appear in fiction, served as the basis for many works about Indians. Cooper's image of the Indian *Conancho* has been the subject of much research as a complex image with positive and negative connotations. The *Osage* Indians, who fascinated Irving, were compared to ancient Roman generals for their heroic warfare. The image of Indians is an integral part of American literature. Works created based on the image of Indians remain the masterpieces of American literature.

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