

RESEARCH ARTICLE



NOBLE SAVAGE OR BLOOD THIRSTY VILLAIN? POLITICS OF OTHERNESS IN *INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD*

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ABSTRACT

A White man's mistake created the American Indians and the image thus constituted is institutionalized by a Eurocentric cultural discourse. Non-aboriginal writings, Disney movies, comic books and advertisements played their part in publicizing misinformed caricatures of Native Americans with headdresses, face paintings, and buckskin – images which are as old as Columbus' discovery of America itself. The concept of noble savage which emerged out of the early travelogues turned out to be a tool for European scholars to pounce on their civilization and in this intellectual struggle the reality of these indigenous people vanished from the pages of history. This paper proposes a discussion on the role of children's books in retaining and projecting the age old images of Native Americans. By taking its focal point as Lynne Reid Banks' *The Indian in the Cupboard* (1980), it attempts to analyze the perceptions regarding Native Americans, its effect on the minds of little children and how by setting up the natives as the 'other', the cultural and political supremacy of the dominant race is established. The intimate authorial voice in children's fiction is alluring and often misleading, and as a consequence, the aboriginals are reduced into mere concepts for cowboy – Indian plays and Halloween masks along with vampires, fairies and wild beasts.

Key Words: Children's literature, Euro centrism, Lynne Reid Banks, Native Americans, Noble savage

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'You think the only people who are people
Are the people who look and think like you
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
You'll learn things you never knew you
never knew'

- From the movie *Pocahontas* (1995)

Europe, like its namesake Europa the Greek Goddess whose name implies "wide-seeing" or "far-seeing", is usually portrayed in terms of intellectual, political, cultural and religious

superiority. In contrast to American and African continents, which appear naked in classical concept, the former wearing a feathered head cap and adorned with face paintings, Europe is the epitome of civilization and learning. They make histories and construct realities personifying the Adam of the new era.

American Indians, commonly identified as Native Americans in present times owe their name to the erroneous geography of the Spanish explorer, Christopher Columbus and his successors

and Western philosophers proceeded successfully to institutionalize the image associated with it – a race gentle and amenable who “display as much love as if they would give their hearts” (Berkhofer 6) but wanting in the superior wisdom of western civilization. Even later realizations on Aztec and Inca civilizations and their accomplishments in art, agriculture and political system did little help to transform the scenario as they practiced a religion which encouraged human sacrifice.

For Europeans and migrant Americans, Native Americans served as the antithesis of their own personae and on describing their cultures or traditions or manners they are constantly measured against White values, beliefs and institutional systems which assert the European superiority over the ‘Other’. With the Puritans or the chosen people of the New Israel, as they call themselves, the promised land of America and its indigenous people turned out to be a playground to practice ‘White Man’s Burden’. Exterminating the Indians or assimilating them to the privileges of Western culture became a divine task of cleansing their own sins. By putting the rich, diverse culture of the natives under the single term ‘Indian’, Western historians transformed the concept of White man’s Indian into a fact.

In spite of the change in Native American’s life and ways, centuries after the first contact, the image of the American Indian still retains the essential stereotypical characters of early days. To the Western mindset, they still roam around the forests in constant communion with nature and so the White fascination with Native Americans with their exotic lifestyle never entirely fades.

The images of the good and bad Indian persist even today without much modification; while the former serves as a critic of the corrupted society, the latter ascertains the White supremacy among non-Europeans. French writer Montaigne could be credited as the first to use this concept of Noble Savage – in his case the Brazilian cannibals – to criticize French poverty and inequality. “He accused Europeans, at bottom, of even greater barbarity than the cannibal’s mode of warfare and diet” (Berkhofer 75). With the philosophers of Enlightenment, this cult of Noble Savage reached its zenith as it promised a life unchained by social

convention and artificial civilization. In the well-known words of Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man*,

Lo, the poor Indian! Whose untutor’d mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the
wind;
His soul proud Science never taught to
stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way,
Yet simple nature to his hope has give’n
Behind the cloud – topped hill, an humble
heav’n. (Berkhofer 79)

But for the Puritan imagination, these blood thirsty savages embodied another role in the celestial drama of good and evil. The captivity narratives of the nineteenth century which are believed to be written on the base of real life experiences, project the image of the bad Indian as a divine warning regarding the condition of human souls. Eventually the bad Indian will be converted to God’s way, just as sure as the Lord’s angels will overcome the designs of Lucifer from the pandemonium.

Cultural nationalism and romanticism made the figure of the Indian prominent in the higher forms of American art and literature on the beginnings of nineteenth century. If Wordsworth and his fellow Lake poets look toward the serene English countryside for inspiration, America has its sublime forests and wild natives. Most romantic among this is the concept of the vanishing race. The story of a race nearing extermination produced the best romantic sentiments and the trend made its mark on world literature through James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). By the mid-1880s, cowboy – Indian movies took over the predominance, influencing the popular psyche to such an extent that the battle between cowboy and Indian, imitating their ridiculous accents, became the favourite past time of American kids.

Both the film and the publishing industry have their role in preserving the old clichés and traditions associated with the Indians and creating new ones. Though the Native Americans have now taken over the writing field, some like N. Scott Momaday attaining literary recognition through Pulitzer Prize, the basic concept of Indian as the alien other self of Whites has managed to survive to

the modern age. Stephanie Meyer's best seller series *Twilight Saga* can be cited as the prime example; Jacob Black, the Reservation Indian werewolf leader who vainly seeks the love of the White heroine, usually makes his appearance – in the novel as well as in the movie – as a half naked boy wearing only trousers, linking him to his loin cloth wearing ancestors of a pre-Columbian era. This paper here narrows down its focus on the genre of children's literature, taking into consideration one of the works of Lynne Reid Banks and it attempts to make an analysis on how the novel propagates the notion of the Native American as the 'Other'.

Unaffected by 'art for art's sake' movements, the stories for children have always been didactic to the core. Keeping in pace with Aristotle's concept of instruction through delight, it performs its task of informing children on the workings of the world, helping them to be competent adults. Removed from adult supervision, the genre provides "a space for imaginative play that allows children to satisfy their curiosity about how things work while learning the consequences of their own actions through trial and error" (Reynolds 19); the do's and don'ts of the world subsequently gets imprinted on the little kid's mind.

The Indian warrior or the 'red skin' wearing only a loin cloth has never stopped fascinating little children. One movie that makes extensive use of this image is Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953) and the other is the screen adaptation of the eternal love story of Pocahontas, the Indian princess and the White colonizer John Smith, though the historical facts remain uncertain. Disney makes a daring attempt here by presenting their heroine with a lighter skin tone with whom the spectators are able to identify. The misconception regarding the Native Americans run deep and in this children's literature's role is not negligent.

The Indian in the Cupboard, the book selected for this paper is the first novel in a five book series. Written by the British author Lynne Reid Banks and illustrated by Brock Cole, it is first published in 1980 and is followed by four sequels: *The Return of the Indian* (1985); *The Secret of the Indian* (1989); *The Mystery of the Cupboard* (1992)

and *The Key to the Indian* (1998). Rated as the best novel of the year by *The New York Times*, the story is also adapted into a fantasy – adventure film in 1995 starring Hal Scardino as Omri and Lifefoot as Little Bear.

Story is thus: Young Omri is presented with a cupboard by his brother Gillion on his birthday. On locking it with his great-grandmother's key, it seems to acquire some magical properties and Omri brings a plastic Native American figurine to life. The Indian introduces himself as Little Bear, son of the Iroquois chief, a tribe which fought with the British against French.

Omri's best friend Patrick too is intrigued with the cupboard and brings his cowboy Boone to the present. Rivalry between the two miniature people leads them to difficulties, but Patrick is adamant in keeping the cowboy until it's too late – Little Bear shoots down Boone while they are watching a Western movie together. Omri tries to seek the help of a World War I military doctor by making his plastic figure alive, but the magic key is found missing. After a brief adventure of Little Bear, whose bravery against Gillion's rat helps them to retrieve the key, Boone is saved through proper treatment. Omri provides Little Bear with a wife – Bright Star – and all are returned to their time. Key is put into the safe keeping of Omri's mother.

What the author offers here is a domestic adventure in a new form of Robinsonade; to the little English kid, bored with plastic toys, the miniature Indian is the genie out of *Arabian Nights*, a representative of the vanished race from the past, to do his biddings. From the fact that the Indian in the story is a part of the past – an 18th century Iroquois brave – not a Native American transported from the 20th century New York, the readers are led to believe that the race of the American Indian, with the rare combination of nobility and savagism combined, does not exist anymore. The world of today is left with the 'degraded' reservation Indian who blatantly resists the attempts of assimilation.

They therefore are not the splendid sight of admiration for a White kid as is the physical appearance of Little Bear:

His blue – black hair, done in a plait and pressed to his head by a colored headband gleamed in the sun. So did the minuscule

muscles of his tiny naked torso, and the skin of his arms. His legs were covered with buckskin leggings, which had some decoration on them too small to see properly. He wore a kind of bandier across his chest and his belt seemed to be made of several strands of some shiny white beads. Best of all, somehow, were his moccasins. (Banks 12)

The Indian of the Whites, at least as is shown in their art forms, is the one with tribal fineries and idiotic speech, deteriorating them as fit examples to study the early ages of human cultural evolution.

Here in the story Omri too is provided with an interesting specimen of early human which boosts up his curiosity and persuades him to steal his brother's magnifying glass for a close analysis. By making a little hearth in his own room with firelighter, and trying to cook meat in the primitive way, Omri travels to the Stone Age from his own home; "with the fire making shadows, the little horse munching his green, and the Indian sitting on his heels warming himself" (Banks 91) with colourful headdress and cloak, it all looked amazingly real; a time when computers and digital class rooms are not available, this is the best visual reality a child can get. He is fascinated by the intricate designs of a longhouse, paintings on the tepee and the bravery of the little Indian. Even though Omri recognizes him as a human being with emotions like himself, Little Bear remains as his pet and study material till the end. In his own words; ". . . I think you're great, I don't mind that you stabbed me, only please can I pick you up? After all, you are my Indian" (Banks 12).

The New World and its indigenous culture features "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Walder 236) in the Western mind, a projection of their other half which they refuse to acknowledge. Little Bear doesn't disappoint the readers in following the romantic image associated with his people. He is brave as an American Indian should be, having taken some thirty scalps, and Omri thinks he is magnificent. As a member of the primitive society abounding in superstitions, he is not surprised to find himself in a giant house in England. For him magic exists, so does good and evil spirits; Omri according to his

conviction is the Great White Spirit who can control the light in the room with a simple button.

In the Western eye an Indian is supposed to be living one with nature, possessing the ability to communicate with animals and tree spirits. So Little Bear, bearing these expectations chooses wisely an Arabian horse and though unacquainted with horses, rides on it beautifully without any primary training. Even the names of the Indian characters – Little Bear, Bright Star – are related to some element in nature. They hunt, eat, dance and pray to their ancestors, on the whole leading a life of bliss without the chains of civilization – the Noble Savage in the European discourse.

Little Bear's world is one of order, beauty and tranquility, free of disruption from warfare, disease, displacement, or Christian evangelism. It serves simultaneously to arouse powerful feelings of nostalgia and nostalgic feelings of power. This is a world under control, a world in which people treat each other with respect; a world pervaded by the soothing, rhythmic music of flutes, rattles and vocables (Strong 408).

Still Little Bear's identity shifts on the British author's demands. Compared to the two kids, Omri and Patrick, who appear mature, the Indian is portrayed as childish with sudden fits of anger and stubborn demands. His miniature existence in the novel symbolically refers to the Western superiority and dominance over his race, a people who is frequently drawn to their animal instincts. Instead of defending Boone's oral insults in the same coin, he shoots down the unarmed man and Omri and Patrick have to step into the scene to save Boone. Little Bear offers to perform a dance ritual to satiate the ancestors and thereby to save Boone, but Omri knows better. They need the superior knowledge of a White medical practitioner, not an Indian tribal medicine. Little Bear is asked to take care of Boone in every possible way as a penance to the crime he has done. Before his return to his own time, he is made the blood brother of Boone as per the custom in western movies which concern with American Indian stories. Blood in Christianity is a purifier of sins and a bond made out of blood is never to be

broken. The White Indian custom of blood brother in the novel indicates the transformation of Little Bear from primitive savagery to noble Western culture. By making his enemy, his friend according to Omri's stern instructions, his journey to salvation has begun.

The image of the Indian as politically, culturally and spiritually fragile without the parental guidance of Europe is echoed throughout the plot. As his namesake Omri, the Israelite king who established Omride dynasty, the little kid Omri too take it upon himself to guide Little Bear to the 'right' way. As the possessor of the magic key, he in a way stands for the door which leads to the spiritual salvation of the pagan, reminding one of Jesus' words "I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved" (John 10:9). As the concept of Indian co-exists with the image of the cowboy, life of an independent Indian is fruitless. Little Bear in the novel acknowledges this parental position of Omri without reluctance. "With Iroquois, mother find wife for son. But Little Bear mother not here. Omri be mother and find" (Banks 85).

Actions of Little Bear is constantly referred in terms of animal behaviour like "crouching", "fierce", "growled", "ravenously" and "scowled" alluding to his primitive animal existence. The noble British way of life with a strict but sensible father, quarrelsome though loving brothers and a mother who kisses good night and cherishes the last gift of her grandmother is in sharp contrast with the almost unemotional life of Little Bear. He snatches up the chieftain position on the old man's sudden death, and decides Bright Star as the wife and takes her to his world without bothering to consult her desires. The idea that she too might have a home and people she loves seems oblivious to him. Little Bear's beast like existence in this sense convinces the White child readers the worth of their own culture and society.

Another aspect which turns American Indians into ignoble savages is the language they are provided with in popular fiction and movies. A piece of Little Bear's speech form is given below:

'Little Bear tired. Work many hour. Look! Make long-house. Work for many braves – I make alone. Also not good tools. Axe Omri give heavy. Why no tomahawk?' . . .

'You like that headdress?'

'Little Bear like. But that for chief. Little Bear not chief till father die' (Banks 56).

As Barbra A. Meek elaborates in her article, this particular 'Injun English', noted for its lack of tense and deletion of various grammatical elements gives out the assumption that Native Americans are linguistically underdeveloped or lacking in grammatical competence (100). The fact that this language with its features of 'foreigner talk' and 'baby talk' is a product of author's imagination, reflecting her ideological assumptions makes it more abominable. U.S.A. has an established American English linguistic system and so this fictional language with its pejorative aspects makes them aliens in their own country, establishing the concept of a vanished race. In the words of Meek,

. . . language in all of its subconscious, habitual, unreflective glory can be a prime site for the perpetuation of the negative, racist and racializing sentiments – even when people intend to act otherwise. When American Indians are assigned dialogue in an unconventional, inarticulate form of English, they continue to be intellectually marginalized in the imagination of public viewers (121)

Lynne Reid Banks' Indian embodies centuries of European and American scholarly tradition which relegated Native Americans to museum pieces, advertisement figures, Halloween masks and tourist souvenir displays. The trend it triggered produced a popular movie and numerous video games, imaging a people and society that does exist only in White man's imagination. This 'White man's Indian' smothers the picture of real American Indian whose poverty stricken life in the reservations allotted to the tribe, with high alcoholic consumption rate, teen pregnancy and suicide rate hardly gets into the public view. What they need is a literature of their own with an audience devoid of discriminating tendencies and racial prejudices.

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