

CAPTIVATING STEREOTYPES: NATIVE AMERICANS IN CAPTIVITY LITERATURE OF COLONIAL AMERICA

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to (re)consider representations of Native Americans in captivity narratives from the perspective of cultural studies. It is generally agreed among scholars that some of the early captivity narratives shaped the perceptions of Native Americans and contributed to the formation of stereotypes which later significantly affected the fates of these peoples. As "*stereotyping involves a reduction of images and ideas to a simple and manageable form*" and "*the function of stereotypes is to perpetuate an artificial sense of difference between 'self' and 'other'*" (Loomba, 2000: 59–60), one important goal of this paper would be to evaluate the significance of these representations of Native Americans for the broader context of American studies, thus hopefully, shedding more light on the issues of (American) identity and power relations within the (American) society.

Key words: American studies, Native Americans, colonial America, captivity narratives, stereotypes

1. Introduction

In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Native American Apology Resolution into law, acknowledging the mistakes made by the U.S. Government with regard to Native Americans and urging the national reconciliation. It is debatable whether this action bears any real political significance, but, symbolically, it represents a step forward in the history of white-Indian relations. This paper will deal with one segment of that history: that of the development of stereotypical representations of Native Americans in the U.S. literature and culture. As stereotyping is a powerful technique of generalization, closely connected to discrimination and prejudice, the analysis of a small sample of captivity narratives published in the 18th and 19th centuries may clarify some of the issues connected to power relations within the American society. The first part of the paper deals with theoretical considerations of the captivity narrative literary genre and its development in America and the development of the most common stereotypes of Native Americans. Two well-known captivity narratives – Mary Rowlandson's and Mary Jemison's – are analyzed in the second part, with the special emphasis on how they incorporate and enforce the dominant ideology. The review of the entire research and its implications are given in the Conclusion section.

2. Captivity Narratives and Native Americans Stereotyping

As previously stated, in this section we will present the review of the most relevant literature dealing with the development of captivity narratives and stereotypes of Native Americans enforced in American literature and culture.

2.1. The Development of the Captivity Narrative Genre

Most scholars agree that captivity narratives represent the first distinctively American literary genre. They are important as the first testimonies of intercultural contacts that took place on the North American continent, revealing the deep dichotomy of the American culture: its foundation on the principles of liberty and equality as well as its dominant and colonizing aspects with regard to minorities (Baepfer, 2004). Captivity narratives are accounts by men and women who were kidnapped by Native Americans and, usually, after spending some time among Native American tribes were restored to their own civilization. There are, of course variations in terms of the gender of main characters, their responses to the new cultures they experienced first hand and the final outcomes of their captivities: some expressed gratitude and exhilaration at their salvation, some used violent means to escape and some decided to stay among the Indians, embracing their way of life.

In his seminal article, Roy Harvey Pearce (1947) gives an overview of the development of captivity narratives, which has served as a model for many scholars. According to him, the development of captivity narratives can be divided into three distinctive periods depending on the main purpose or the 'cultural significance' of the narrative. In the first period, from the last decades of the 17th century to the early 18th century, captivity narratives had a religious confessional function: a (usually female) believer went through an ordeal of captivity and was rescued by means of God's mercy. Then, in the 18th century up to the middle of the 19th century, captivity narratives served as political propaganda: like the ones published in the previous period, most of those narratives were also written and edited by Puritan clergymen with the main purpose of representing Indians and their French allies as violent, hostile, thus disseminating hatred towards them. According to Pearce, in the second half of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, captivity narratives lost their religious and political significance and were rather accepted and read as popular mixtures of fact and sentimental fiction – even *the 18th century equivalent of the dime novel* (p. 13), whereas in a more contemporary period they became invaluable sources of historical and ethnological knowledge.

Furthermore, the research on captivity narratives was enriched by more perspectives and points of analysis; thus, they are viewed as forms of American mythology – accounts of heroic quests into the wilderness and heroes' subsequent initiation into its mysteries (Slotkin, 1973) or as a means of establishing the hegemonic typification of the *captive self* and the *captivating other*, which enabled

the dominant group to construct and exert its political and cultural supremacy over the Native Americans (Strong, 1999). Another point that has often been emphasized in the literature dealing with this topic is that the shift in the function of captivity narratives was accompanied by a shift in the gender of the main hero(in)es. Namely, a true story of a Christian woman helpless in the wilderness among the savages was replaced by a fictionalized story of a man – a brave and resourceful frontiersman who conquers the wilderness and its inhabitants. Some critics see early American captivity narratives as being of crucial importance for the development of some of the major works in American 19th-century literature, namely, Cooper's classic *The Last of the Mohicans* (Haberly, 1976). From the publication of Cooper's famous novel, captivity tradition, secularized, fictionalized and reduced has continued to be present in both popular and high culture through books, movies, television, "*remaining today an implicit model for representations of threatening otherness*" (Strong, 1999: 2). Appealing to the sentiments of their readers and viewers, captivity narratives as well as the forms that sprung from them have been immensely popular and influential in terms of propagating certain ideas and images: e.g. that of a fragile woman among brutes, a brave, self-reliant frontier hero or a wild and merciless Indian. As the main focus of this paper are stereotyped representations of Native Americans, the following section will explore this phenomenon more closely.

2.2. The Development of Stereotypes of Native Americans

Among numerous definitions of stereotypes, we have chosen the one provided by Ania Loomba which states that "*stereotyping involves a reduction of images and ideas to a simple and manageable form*" and "*the function of stereotypes is to perpetuate an artificial sense of difference between 'self' and 'other'*" (Loomba, 2000: 59-60). Therefore, stereotyping is a technique of generalization, closely connected to discrimination and prejudice, which puts people into convenient pigeon holes without much regard for any individual differences. Another important purpose of stereotypes is creating the artificial boundary between two groups of people, one of which is by definition superior to the other.

If one closely examines the development of Native American representations in American culture and literature, it becomes obvious that the primordial myth of the *noble savage* was quickly replaced by the one of the *treacherous savage*, followed by the myth of the *filthy savage*, shaped towards the end of the 19th century (Washburn, 1957). The crucial change seems to have taken place in the middle of the 18th century, when it became clear that it would be impossible to assimilate the Indian culture into the white one, as some of the earlier authors had anticipated (Pearce, 1957). What is more, in that period the racial differentiation between the two groups became prominent. Up to the middle of the 18th century, the members of the white elite believed that there were no racial distinctions between them and the Native Americans; however, from that period onwards the usage of the adjective *red* and the association of Native Americans with the

darkness (of both skin and character) became prevalent in literature and culture (Vaughan, 1995). The process is most likely closely connected to the changes in the power relations between the dominant white group and the Native American racial and cultural minority: as the power of the white majority grew, so the image of the Indian deteriorated, resulting in a set of firmly-rooted and often-repeated negative stereotypes.

Among the negative traits that were most often used to describe Native Americans were "*nakedness, cannibalism, barbarism, idolatry, devil worship, brutality, lechery, indolence, jealousy, vindictiveness, slovenliness*", although the early records show that some praised their admirable physique, hospitality, integrity, eloquence, hardiness and stoicism, the practice which was soon abandoned (Vaughan, 1995: 11). In early (mostly Puritan) captivity narratives, Native Americans were referred to as: "*carnivorous beasts and fearsome devils, destroyers of home and families and defilers and even devourers of the weak*" (Strong, 1999: 132). As those early narratives had a purpose of warning the entire Puritan community against transgression (symbolized by threatening wilderness) and the captive was a metaphor for the 'godly society', (s)he was described as prey, and the captors as *wild predators: wolves, tigers, vultures, dragons or devils* (*Ibid.*: 145). Such descriptions served a two-fold purpose: on one hand, they contributed to the alienation and demonization of the Indian 'other', while on the other, they confirmed the opposite identity of the whites: civilized, godly, righteous and human.

As the Frontier moved westwards and the immediate threat of the Indian attacks subsided, the stereotype of a *barbarous savage* became replaced by the one of a *filthy savage*, unassimilable and doomed to marginalization in the mainstream American society. In addition, a large number of captivity narratives published after the War of Independence were the accounts of the frontiersmen adopted by the Indian tribes or partly transculturated individuals (Strong, 1999), secularized in terms of contents, but still enforcing the dominant role of the white man who conquers the wilderness by adopting some Indian habits. Thus, the cultural hegemony of the white society was being established, as will be demonstrated on two concrete examples in the following section.

3. Two Examples of Captivity Narratives

As previously stated, in this section, we will closely examine two very popular captivity narratives, both best-sellers in their time of publication, both narrated by women but also edited and commented upon by men. Besides the time of publication, one major difference between the two is the final outcome of the captivity: in Mary Rowlandson's narrative she is restored to her own community and her view of her captors remains within the boundaries of her Puritan cultural framework, whereas Mary Jemison is an example of an acculturated captive –

she remains to live with the Seneca tribe and adopts the Indian way of life. We will try to prove that, despite those differences in tone, both narratives, although featuring women as heroines enforce the dominant masculine ideology of the periods in which they were published (Fitzpatrick, 1991).

3.1. *In the company of hell-hounds* – Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative

One of the best-known captivity narratives from the colonial American period is the "Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson", prefaced by Increase Mather, a famous Puritan clergyman and theologian and accompanied by a sermon written by Rowlandson's husband, a Puritan minister. She was captured in 1675, during King Philip's/Metacom's War and was held in captivity for more than 11 weeks when she was ransomed and returned to her community. It is very important to understand her origin in order to get a better understanding of her narrative: a daughter of a wealthy landowner and a wife of a Puritan minister, considered valuable for exchange although none of these facts is mentioned in her narrative. The reason for this lies in the cultural function that the narrative was supposed to have had: that of warning the New England Puritan community against transgressions.

Rowlandson's portrayal of her captors is decidedly hostile and although some justification for that can be found in the fact that her sister, her nephews and even her own daughter were killed as the outcome of the Indian attack, it is still striking how her outlook never moves away from the pre-set cultural framework of her Puritan community. She describes her Indian captors as: "*a company of hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting and insulting*", "*ravenous beasts*", "*murderous wretches*", "*merciless heathen*", "*black creatures*", "*barbarous enemy*", "*inhumane creatures*", liars with "*foul looks*" and "*hellish*" manners, "*roaring, lions and savage bears*" (Rowlandson, 2009¹). It is important to point out that her typification is not merely a result of her traumatizing experience, but rather a part of a bigger cultural pattern enforced by the Puritan dominant ideology. By marking Native Americans as savage, inhuman and morally corrupt devil's servants, the writer (it must not be overlooked that Rowlandson's narrative was prefaced, pre-approved and most probably edited by the leading Puritan clergyman of that period) not only reduces them to an image of a threatening and savage Other, but also implies that the (Puritan) Self is the exact opposite – civilized, human, morally superior and godly. This attitude is visible throughout the narrative: Rowlandson looks down on every single Indian custom she observes during her captivity and interprets them merely as proofs of Indian irreversible cultural (and by proxy, political and economic) inferiority. Therefore, her attitude is a mere reflection of the general Puritan attitude towards their Native American 'neighbors' and this best-selling narrative confirms it and further reinforces it.

¹ All subsequent quotations are from Mary Rowlandson, 2009 [1682]. *Project Gutenberg's Captivity and Restoration*, Ebook, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/851/851-h/851-h.htm> [June 21, 2012].

Another important characteristic of these early captivity narratives is the relative absence of an individual voice: Mary Rowlandson's story is in fact not the story of Mary Rowlandson, but rather of an entire community epitomized by an individual. Just like she felt threatened by the bestial Indians, the entire Puritan godly community was threatened by wilderness and the dangers of transgression which attracted god's punishment. Therefore, any prize or punishment was not earned by an individual (which is the essence of the Puritan Calvinist doctrine of predestination): rather, it was either the result of God's mercy or god's just and deserved punishment. Thus, Mary Rowlandson interprets merciful acts of her captors (giving her food, water to wash herself, letting her ride while they walk) as acts of divine providence through the only ideology available to her (Burnham, 1997). She (as well as the readers of her time) remains blind to Native American cultural specificities, thus alienating and stereotyping their entire culture with the purpose of establishing and maintaining the dominance of the white (male) Puritan culture.

However, a careful reader may observe that in some places, the Puritan totalitarian and exclusive rhetoric crumbles, as well as the view based on binary oppositions. The descriptions of Indian celebrations, their grieving over their loved ones, the mercy and compassion they show towards their captive, although heavily understated and (mis)interpreted still challenge the Puritan-formed dichotomy of (un)godly. Another thing that produces the same effect is Rowlandson's behavior towards her captors. For example, when her daughter dies, she feels natural grief and blames her captors for that. However, when the baby of her mistress Weetamoo dies, the only comment she can give is that "*there was one benefit in it — that there was more room*". Instead of exhibiting sympathy for the mother who goes through the same pain of a child loss, she is indifferent and even cynical. She grieves over the deaths of English soldiers, but at the same time sees nothing wrong in their slaughtering of the Native Americans and even seems puzzled by "*the strange providence of God in preserving the heathen*". The Puritan cultural framework sees Indians merely as the instruments of god's punishment – a "*scourge to His people*", and Rowlandson's actions and attitudes, despite her original intention, challenge the contrast between the "*lovely faces of Christians*" and the "*foul looks of those heathens*" she endeavors to create. Her attitude is the consequence of her cultural framework which typifies and reduces everyone marked as 'Other' to an image, a concept, a less-than-human savage, thus justifying any type of violent behavior towards the stigmatized.

The shrewdness, practicality and even cruelty she exhibits in dealing with the Indians may be puzzling for the reader who reads her narrative as a story of a grieving mother and a fragile woman alone in the wilderness surrounded by enemies. However, the way she behaves and the way she deals with her captors are not significantly different from the ways in which her male peers behave. She tries to manipulate and trick the Indians by means available to her, by her own skills – not those of handling a gun or a knife, but her sewing skills – she sells her

services, all the time carefully noting which types of behavior will suite her best (for example, offering her earnings to her master, or feeling glad when her gift is accepted – “*I was not a little glad that I had anything that they would accept of, and be pleased with.*”). She tries to somehow trick the Indians into doing what she wants, never abandoning her feeling of contempt for them. In a way, she also subdues the Indians every time she manages to persuade them to do what she wants them to do. Although she is a woman, in many ways she behaves like a man: her starting point is that of one being infinitely superior in intelligence, morality, even humanness, and she never abandons it. Her way of thinking is shaped by the culture in which she was brought up and is not likely to change. Never does she exhibit any intention of true contact and communication with the Indian culture – she merely does whatever it takes to survive in order to demonstrate the superiority of her own culture and way of thinking.

The above mentioned Increase Mather’s preface and Reverend Rowlandson’s sermon attached to the narrative have the primary purpose of adding to the veracity of Mary Rowlandson’s story, but they also provide a sort of an apology, which seems to have been necessary in that period when it came to women writers – it was necessary to defend the idea of a woman publicly speaking/writing (Burnham, 1997). Significantly, the preface confirms the *chastity* of the author, and Rowlandson herself emphasizes that point several times in the narrative. It may mean that there had been some voices in her society who doubted her account, but it also reveals one great fear of the Puritan authorities: the fear of succumbing to the temptations of the wilderness and those who inhabit it. That fear was especially targeted at women, as they were considered to be the weaker sex, the one prone to temptations. The transculturated female was thus, a Puritan nightmare, as it implied that the perfect Puritan community of the elect few was also in danger of being penetrated from the outside. It took another hundred years for the captivity narrative with a different tone and outcome to appear, as we shall see further.

3.2. *She is our sister and gladly we welcome her here* – Mary Jemison’s captivity narrative

It has already been stated that the representations of Native Americans in literature and culture shifted along with the shift in power relations between the dominant white group and the subordinate Native American one. As the threat of Indian attacks in the frontier settlements subsided and as they were, significantly reduced in numbers, pushed further into the continent, it was no longer necessary to represent them as a threatening, savage ‘Other’. This transition is also evident in the tone of the captivity narratives published in the 19th century. The narrative that we will present here was published in the 19th century, but the events described happened at the end of the colonial period in America, so it was deemed a good illustration of both various views of intercultural contacts and a changing pattern in the captivity literature genre.

Mary Jemison's narrative is a story of an American frontierswoman who was captured and adopted by the Seneca tribe in 1755, and, who, unlike many heroines of similar narratives chose to stay and live with her captors. Her narrative was shaped, edited, prefaced and published by minister James E. Seaver and was one of the best-selling books in 19th-century America. The main difference between Jemison's and Rowlandson's narratives is the fact that Jemison's account represents a more accurate testimony of the contact between two cultures, without the striking influence of the dominant ideology. It was Seaver who wrote the account after interviewing Jemison, and although his moralizing voice can be discerned at some points, it is still Jemison's story that is of highest prominence.

Jemison's position is a very interesting one: on one hand, she is almost completely adapted to the Indian way of life, whereas on the other, she retains some elements of the white culture. In terms of clothes, customs, every day routines, religion and marriage, she is a Seneca, whereas her very good English and the English names she gave to her children reveal the links with the culture she was born into. Mary Jemison's narrative also gives descriptions of the cruelties performed by the Indians: for example, she gives a detailed account of how her parents were scalped and killed and several ritual torture ceremonies performed on the English settlers. However, she also provides an explanation for these actions – we find out that her parents would not have been killed if the Indian party had not been pursued by the whites or that it is the Indian custom to replace a relative killed by the (white) enemy either by adopting a captive into a tribe or, more rarely, by taking the bloody revenge on those who had been captured: "*It is family, and not national, sacrifices amongst the Indians, that has given them an indelible stamp as barbarians, and identified their character with the idea which is generally formed of unfeeling ferocity, and the most abandoned cruelty.*"² The readers get an insight into the Indian culture, instead of reduced and simplified images and stereotypes. Mary Jemison's openness to a foreign culture enables her to see the members of the Seneca tribe as friends and family, as can be seen in her touching description of the adoption ceremony when she was welcomed into a tribe as a substitute sister for the killed Indian warrior. While Mary Rowlandson could only hear roars and wild howling, Mary Jemison paints a completely different picture: that of humanity, kindness and mercy.

Jemison also subverts the stereotype of a '*treacherous savage*': she describes the Senecas as "*naturally kind, tender and peaceable towards their friends, and strictly honest;*" and explains that all the cruelties for which they are accused and stigmatized by the whites can be explained by their system of values. This view is in direct contrast with the one popularized by the earlier captivity narratives. Furthermore, Jemison mentions some of the atrocities done by the whites and comments upon the detrimental effects of alcohol on the Indian society. Her

² All subsequent quotations are from James E. Seaver. 2004 [1824]. *The Project Gutenberg EBook of A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, EBook, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6960/pg6960.html> [August 10, 2012].

narrative was the first one to have brought up this issue and her statement that it "*will ultimately produce their [Indian] extermination*" almost proved to be prophetic. What is more important, it drew attention to the harmful effects of the introduction of the elements of the white culture on the native one.

Although Jemison's narrative offers a sympathetic picture of Native Americans, its implications are that the Native American culture cannot be incorporated into the American mainstream (Scheckel, 1998), but that, rather "*Indians must and will be Indians, In spite of all the means that can be used for their cultivation in the sciences and arts.*". Although she adopted the Indian name Dickewamis, and although her children are referred to as the Indians, she is still called 'the White Woman' and is identified with the values of the 19th-century "*domestic ideology*" (Scheckel, 1998: 85), meaning that the overall perception of her and her account does not abandon the dominant line of thinking. In terms of (mainstream) literature and culture, she is a matriarchal precursor of Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, and other patriarchal frontier heroes (historical and fictional), who adopt some of the Native American ways but still remain the enforcers of the dominant white ideology (Slotkin, 1973).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to establish a link between the shifts in the representations of Native Americans in American literature and culture and the development of the captivity narrative genre. It is noticeable that those representations are closely connected with the power relations between the dominant white group and the subordinate Native American one. Furthermore, the white dominant ideology used those representations to establish its hegemony and alienate, exclude and even annihilate the cultural significance of Native Americans for the mainstream American society. Among various means of enforcing this hegemonic typification, captivity narratives occupy a prominent place. Whether they served as a means of Puritan propaganda, or whether they were secularized and/or fictionalized frontier stories, captivity narratives always worked in favor of the dominant white (male) group. The two narratives analyzed in this paper offer two very different perspectives, but in both of them the influence of the dominant ideology can be discerned, only working in opposite directions. Rowlandson's narrative openly enforces the dominant Puritan ideology and the view of Native Americans as the hostile 'Others', but the Puritan rhetoric crumbles in some places and an awareness of a different culture emerges. On the other hand, Jemison's narrative gives an account of a transculturation process a white person undergoes validating the Indian way of life; however, it still (though unwittingly) enforces the view of Native Americans as unassimilable and therefore, doomed to marginalization.

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STEREOTIPIZACIJA SEVERNOAMERIČKIH INDIJANACA U PRIPOVESTIMA IZ ZAROBLJENIŠTVA KOLONIJALNE AMERIKE

Rezime: Rad se bavi razmatranjem predstava severnoameričkih Indijanaca u pripovestima iz zarobljeništva iz perspektive studija kulture. U istraživanjima koja se bave ovom tematikom preovladava mišljenje da su pripovesti iz zarobljeništva nastale u kolonijalnom periodu umnogome oblikovale poimanje severnoameričkih Indijanaca i doprinele stvaranju stereotipa koji su kasnije imali ozbiljan uticaj na sudbinu

tih naroda. Kako „stereotipizacija predstavlja redukciju slika i ideja na jednostavne oblike kojima je lako manebrisati“, a „uloga stereotipa je stvaranje i održavanje veštačkog osećaja različitosti između *sebe* i *drugog*“ (Lumba [Loomba], 2000: 59–60), važan cilj ovog rada bio bi procena značaja ovakvih predstava za širi kontekst Američkih studija. Na taj način bi se obuhvatila i detaljnije proučila pitanja (američkog) identiteta i odnosa moći (*power relations*) unutar (američkog) društva.

Ključne reči: Američke studije, severnoamerički Indijanci, kolonijalna Amerika, pripovesti iz zarobljeništva, stereotipi