

Children's Literature and the 'Red Indian': A Study of Institutionalization of Racism in Popular Children's Literature across Ages

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Abstract

Euro-centric pedagogies have systematically employed the usage of certain stereotypical elements in literature to sustain racism. The process has been in vogue ever since the Europeans set foot on the soil of America and discovered the New World which was hitherto non-existent for them. Racism is instilled into young minds with the help of stereotypes and children's literature is one of the prime areas where racism has been prevalent since time immemorial. This article shall discuss the racist practices associated with the depiction of the First Nations of North America. The First Nations or the First Peoples have been referred to as the 'Red Indians' in a large number of European texts, many of which are regarded as classics in today's world. The derogatory, racist term 'Red Indian' along with the stock images have filled the pages of many children's books written in the English language. Even after the Red Power Movement in North America, the image of the Red Indian in popular children's books has more impact than the novels of Jeannette Armstrong, the eminent First Nations writer. This paper shall focus on Herge's *Tintin in America*, J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Laura Ingall's *Little House on the Prairie* and Walter Edmonds' *The Matchlock Gun* as examples of such racism. The popularity of these texts and their universal acceptability raise before us certain uncomfortable questions as to how these texts are to be re-read and re-interpreted in today's world.

Keywords: *Children's literature, racism, 'Red Indians', Eurocentrism.*

Behold! the savage tribes, in wildest strain,
Approach with death and terror in their train;
No longer silence o'er the forest reigns,
No longer stillness now her pow'r retains,
But hideous yells announce the murd'rous band,
Whose bloody footsteps desolate the land (Goldsmith 4)

These iconic lines from Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Rising Village' at once set the tone of what to expect in that part of the world which is infested with a strange breed of human beings, popularly known as 'Red Indians.'



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It also, in a way, sums up all that there is to know about them – that is ‘savage’, ‘wild’, ‘hideous’ and ‘bloody.’ ‘Whose bloody footsteps desolate whose land?’ – that is the very question which lies at the root of this construction of a stereotypical image of the Red Indian in the minds of not only Europeans but even of those who live in those parts of the world which have been ruled by Europe, including South Asia.

For them, ‘Red Indians’ are an ethnic group of people. Derived from the Greek word ‘ethnos’, ‘ethnic’ was originally used to denote those who were non-Christians. It was later used to indicate a common heritage of a group of people. (Li 1990, 5). According to Li, biological and genetic features that are believed to have produced racial and ethnic groups are also used to determine their mental, social and cultural capacities. Thus, ‘ethnic groups’ are considered to be inferior to the supposedly superior Europeans (4). Hence, ethnicity has been used as a determining factor in the construction of identity. Driedger had identified six components of identification in his seminal work *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity* (1978). According to his theory, ecological territory, ethnic culture, ethnic institutions, historical symbols, ideology and charismatic leadership constitute identity (9-22). As a result, ethnicity is seen in terms of identity in the sense that it is a question of both self-definition and definition by others (Aboud 1981, 198). The construction of ethnic hierarchy is also related to the notions of capital and labor under capitalism. Internationalization of capital has been instrumental to a great extent in fracturing the notion of ethnicity in today’s globalized world. However, we tend to forget that polyethnicism was always present in large nation states such as the Americas (Kymlicka 1995, 11). This leads to the conclusion that unequal relationships were always present in societal structure and it became just another approach to examine race and ethnicity.

In the context of America, the process began ever since the Europeans set their feet on the soil of America in the fifteenth century and ‘discovered’ the New World which was hitherto non-existent for them. Christopher Columbus discovered ‘America’ in 1492 and with it he discovered a tribe of human beings whom he called ‘los indios’ – the Indians (Hoxie 568). They used to apply the sap of a tree for the purpose of repelling insects. However, the color of the sap, when mixed with their skin, made them look red. As they appeared red-skinned to Columbus and his crew, the original inhabitants of the landmass of North America came to be known as the

‘Red Indian’ or the ‘Red Skinned.’ It is only recently that they are being referred to as the First Nations or the First Peoples of America following vehement protests and movements against usurpation of their lands, rights and identities. Notwithstanding their protests, American as well as European literature have systematically employed the image of the Red Indian and upheld it as the ultimate ‘other’ in order to sustain racism. More dangerously, racism is instilled into young minds from a very early age with the help of the stock imagery used in children’s books (which are generally illustrated) to project the ‘uncivilised’ ‘Indian’ as an anti-thesis to European civilisation and culture. Children’s literature, in fact, happens to be one of the prime areas of thriving racial hatred and xenophobia.

In this article, I shall discuss the racist practices associated with the depiction of the First Nations of North America in Children’s literature. To illustrate my point I have chosen four texts – Herge’s *Tintin in America*, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, Laura Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* and Walter Edmonds’ *The Matchlock Gun*.

The first two texts are European and universally popular, across space and time. The last two may not be that popular world-wide or known to everybody, but they are American texts, located in the landmass where ‘real’ Indians are found and are very well-known in America which includes both the United States and Canada.

Many scholars throughout the world are working on the area of racism in children’s literature. Christopher Meyer’s article ‘The Apartheid of Children’s Literature’ published in *New York Times* on March 15, 2014 talks about internalized and institutionalized racism, which begins from school through children’s story books (1-3). It is through such books that we find two images of the ‘savage’ – the blood-thirsty savage and the noble savage (Chateaubriand 1902)

In general, the images of the ‘savage’ and ‘savagery’ are mostly related to Africa and the Africans. However, the ‘Red Indians’ seem to be another variant, mainly and namely in color of the ‘black’ African. Also, the projection of the ‘Red Indians’ by European writers and that by American writers is not always the same. The Red Indian, also known as Amerindian, is looked upon in a different manner by Europeans residing in Europe. The problem of the ‘Indian’ is different in case of the people of European origin settled in the United States and Canada as it is entirely dependent on the politics of the control of land.

If we take a look into the history, American history is divided into pre-contact and post-contact eras, i.e. before and after contact with Europe. However, some scholars suggest that there have been indications of contact between maritime Indians of the far North East and Scandinavia even before the Americas were officially discovered by Europe. There was, in fact, a small colony of Greenlandic Norse and the Celts in New Found land as long ago as 1004 AD (Wilson and Urion 22). The sustained contact between Europeans and the native Indians since the 1490s fundamentally altered the balance of political power in the world and set the stage for European dominance over the landmass of America (23). In 1497 John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), originally an Italian navigator and explorer, landed on New Found land under the patronage of the British king Henry VII. When the British comes, how can the French be far behind? In 1524, the French King Francis I sent Giovanni de Verrazano to explore the New Worlds. On Aug 5, 1583, Humphrey Gilbert of England formally took possession of New Found land. In 1608 Samuel de Champlain founded France's first permanent colony in Canada at Quebec. The colony of Acadia grew up slowly, reaching a population of about 5,000 by 1713 and was known by the name of New France. Britain took over the southern regions along the Hudson Bay and the Anglo-French tussle over domination of the North American landmass continued till 1763 when the Treaty of Paris eventually forced France to give up all its territories other than Quebec to Great Britain. Thus, from 1763 onwards, started the era of British domination over the landmass of North America (Kelley and Trebilcock 27-28).

The contact period brought three things to the continent – trade, warfare and disease. As fur trade flourished along with slave trade, the resistance of the natives against occupation of their lands was crushed by the British with the help of both arms and germs, such as contaminated blankets (Wilson and Urion 25). Besides battles, epidemics of bubonic plague, measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria and small pox wiped out a major chunk of the indigenous population in the 17th century (Wilson and Urion 26-27). Genocide was rampant. By the British Proclamation Act of 1763, Indian lands were taken away under the control of the British Government and by The Indian Act of 1876, 'Indians' were legally classified as a distinct group of people. Ironically, this group was never homogenous – the Crees, the Ojibways, the Iroquians, the Saulteaux, the Salish, the Mohawks, the Six Nations tribe, the Delawares and the Black feet –

were only a few among many, many others who came to be categorized as ‘Indians’ by the British Government.

Again, these Indians were spread across the Rockies, the eastern side of which fell under the jurisdiction of the United States and the Western half fell under the territory of Canada. In Canada, the Government decided who could be termed as an ‘Indian’ and further classified them into ‘status’ and ‘non-status’ Indians. The ‘status’ Indians were again subdivided into ‘Treaty Indians’ and ‘Non-Treaty Indians’ while for the ‘non-status Indians’ Bill C-31 was introduced in 1985 with the Amendment of the Indian Act. These acts were solely intended for those aboriginals whom the Government classified as Indians – the Métis and the Inuit’s were left out of these politics. Unaware of all such complexities, the general psyche is to consider Canadian Indians more difficult and wild than the U.S. Indians as Canada is more cold, more desolate, more unapproachable and thus more unknown to the general mind. These ‘Indians’ whose lands were snatched away and whose identities robbed became threats to those Europeans who settled on their stolen lands. That is why the image of the ‘savage’ and the ‘noble savage’ and their distinction comes within our purview of discussion. In the two American texts that I have chosen for discussion – *Little House on the Prairie* and *The matchlock Gun*, Indians are blood-thirsty savages. However, in Herge’s *Tintin in America*, they may be savages all right but basically naïve and ignorant to such an extent that they are reduced to comic characters (caricatures) and objects of laughter. That is how Europe looks at them from a distance. They are ferocious, exotic yet attractive.

Let us begin our discussion with *Tintin in America* which is a non-Anglophone text translated into almost all languages in the world including vernacular languages in India where it is extremely popular among kids and teenagers. Almost all of us have read and enjoyed the adventures of Tintin in our youth. George Remy or Herge’s *Les aventures de Tintin en Amérique* was first published in book form in 1932 in French. It was serialised since 1931 in the journal *Le Petit Vingtième*. It was the third in the adventure series of the Belge boy-detective Tintin. The story is set in America in the 1930s when the place was notorious for its gangsters, shootouts and unlawful activities. The image was one of a ‘wild, wild West.’ In fact, the entire story gives the readers a feeling that anything might happen in the U.S. any moment, projecting America as the ‘anti-thesis’ of Europe which stands for law, order, decorum and propriety. Interestingly, the

majority of Tintin's adventures take place outside Europe. *Tintin in America* was preceded by *Tintin in Congo* and followed by *The Cigars of the Pharaoh*, places where adventures are possible. Where the Chicago City itself offers so much of adventure to Tintin and Milou, it would be no surprise then that the adventure package would be doubled the moment they reach the locale of the 'Indians.'

The Indians live in a particular area. In the text, it is shown as the Redskin City, the territory of the Indians as if it was like this from the very beginning. In all white people's stories, we find these particular areas marked as Indian settlements but we do not question or want to know the history behind it. The Indian Act and the subsequent processes of a system of reservation for the Indians purposefully relegated them and confined them within enclosures called Reserves, thus restricting their freedom of movement and denying them to live with the 'mainstream' white Canadians. This history of denial is never mentioned in children's stories. As kids, we begin to get introduced, initiated and habituated to the exoticness of these so-called Indians and this exoticism begins with the territory they inhabit, their regalia, their tendency to broach warfare and kill 'civilised' human beings, their superstitious and totems, and finally their weapons such as the tomahawk. *Tintin in America* employs all these stereotypes one after the other.

In pursuit of the gangster chief, Tintin and Milou (Snowy) reach the Redskin City where Tintin, points out – 'Just look, Snowy, a real Red Indian' (Hergé 16) In the original it was, <<Tu Vois, Milou ? Voilà un vrai Peau-rouge>> (18). The racism, hilariously, is restricted not just within the humans, it is extended even to the canines where the illustrated comic strip shows the pristine white Snowy bemusedly looking at the skin colour of the dogs surrounding him and saying – "Redskin dogs! OK, so I'm a paleface... Haven't you redskins ever seen one before?" (16) The Indians in question here are the Black feet and Tintin has apparently treaded in their 'hunting ground.' The gangster chief exploits the war-hungry spirit and the naivety of the tribe to set them against Tintin and get him out of his way. He instigates the Sachem, i.e. the Chief of the Blackfoot tribe by saying that Tintin has come to steal their land and that they must kill him. However, this fight would not be possible without their tomahawk and to the gangster's dismay the Sachem confessed, "I can't remember where in the world we buried the hatchet when we finished our last bit of fighting' (19), but one thing he was sure of – "No tomahawk' no war!"

(19). The entire conversation projected the Indians as obstinate, superstitious and ridiculously naïve who stick to certain stupid customs and norms, even in the face of imminent danger. When they finally capture and declare war against Tintin, the Sachem describes him as a “Paleface with the soul of a Coyote” (21). In Native American tradition, the trickster figure of Coyote does not have any negative connotation (Kim 1992, 1998, 2004, 2009). Coyote can be shrewd and mischievous but never a villain, he/she is very much part of the Native way of life. To compare an apparent enemy with Coyote is an example of European ignorance. Nonetheless, these words have been used to give the readers the feeling that the author was sufficiently knowledgeable about the Red Indian culture and was thus successful in bringing in the required exoticism in the text to attract and excite his readers. Tintin is easily successful in fooling the Indians by setting them against each other and taking advantage of their fights to slip out of their clutches. The entire episode, i.e. the incidents taking place in the Redskin City, is symbolic of what actually happened with the Indians in America – they were too gullible and too easy victims who could be conquered with the help of a little bit of European intelligence. The Indian episode is not the central one in the text, it covers only about 10 pages of the entire book of 62 pages, yet the cover page of *Tintin in America* (in both French & English) bears the image of Tintin being held captive by the Indian Chief who is holding the tomahawk in one hand and pointing his other hand towards Tintin waiting to be killed.

Going back to the discussion on the savage and the noble savage, the Indians in *Tintin* are approached by another ‘paleface’ and have been misinformed about Tintin by him. The fact remains that they can be communicated with and had they not been instigated, they might not have attacked Tintin or looked upon him as their enemy. They would fall under the category of savages who might come in service of the white civilized man.

This distinction between savages is made clear in *Peter Pan*, which again, is a very popular children’s text in the Anglophone world. Scottish dramatist James Matthew Barrie’s fantasy fairy tale, *The Little White Bird* published in 1902 introduced for the first time the character of Peter Pan, a naughty boy who could fly and who never grew up. The play *Peter Pan or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* was staged in 1904 for the first time and published in novel form under the title *Peter and Wendy* in 1911 in the U.K. and the U.S. The story was about the adventures of Peter and Wendy in Neverland, the island inhabited by pirates, mermaids, fairies

and Red Indians. It actually puts the Indians in the same bracket as fairies and mermaids, i.e. exciting, exotic and absurd. Peter and his gang are up against the notorious pirate Captain Hook and in the island –

On the trail of the pirates, stealing noiselessly down the war-path, which is not visible to inexperienced eyes, come the redskins, every one of them with his eyes peeled. They carry tomahawks and knives, and their naked bodies gleam with paint and oil. Strung around them are scalps, of boys as well as of pirates, for these are the Piccaninny tribe, and not to be confused with the soft-hearted Delawares or the Hurons. (Barrie 57)

So this distinction between tribes is made -- not all redskins are as ferocious as the Piccaninnies. There are soft-hearted versions of redskins too. But, for the sake of adventure, Peter and his friends come across the blood-thirsty Piccaninnies who wear human skulls round their necks and are always on the hunt for blood. They are described in conjunction with the ferocious beasts prowling in the island such as Lily, the panther, and the word ‘savage’ is used to describe both the beasts and the redskins who are just another variant of the beasts. These two types of ‘animals’ are sort of substitutes of each other – both are ‘man eaters’ (57) and sources of danger to the civilized man. One who treads into their territory by chance or for the sake of adventure, must protect himself from them. This place, this utopic Neverland as the name itself suggests, is a far-away escape an idyllic space removed from reality. In the real world of the civilized European, red skinned people and wild beasts like lions and panthers are objects to be watched from a distance and held in awe. *Tintin* and *Peter Pan* evoke imageries and portray characters and situations in such a light that children from a very early age begin to think that such exotic creatures as Red Indians cannot be a part of their ‘normal’ real’ life. Euro-centric pedagogies, imprint such images on the minds of children since impressionable age that the process of ‘otherization’ is initiated too early and that too, unconsciously. The worst part is that the colonies of Europe which includes India, are so influenced by these European texts and Eurocentric thoughts that they too have internalized this racism unconsciously and unquestioningly, and consider the Native Americans as inferior uncivilized human beings.

So far I have discussed two European texts which look at Red Indians from a distance. Now, I would like to move on to the ‘American’ texts where ‘Indians’ are a problem and real threat to the New Americans. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* published posthumously in 1935 is the third book in her Little House Series, which constituted popular

children's stories in Canada in the 'pioneering days.' The stories trace the journey of the Ingalls family from Minnesota, South Dakota to the Prairies of Canada from 1870 to 1894. They are all about the struggles, hardships and tenacity of the Ingalls who decide to "see the West" and settle in a rugged land with the determination to cultivate and the mission to civilize the land. This echoes the sentiment of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village* with which I opened this paper and the entire discussion on the European standpoint and the Canadian standpoint vis-à-vis the Indians. While for the Europeans the Indians were simply those 'others' who could be ignored and avoided, for the Canadians they were impediments in their way to live as they wished. They posed real danger and threatened their lives with disruption and violence. Pioneer Canadian critic Northrop Frye notes – "communities...that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together (when) confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting are bound to develop a garrison mentality" (225). Leave aside the original inhabitants of the land, but nature itself has been depicted as menacing and malevolent by the pioneer settlers in Canada with repeated emphasis that "Canada was a no-man's land with huge rivers, lakes, islands, vast empty spaces and lack of privacy with no defences against the prying or avaricious eyes" (221). The prying eyes of beasts and native Indians were all the same for the settlers making the 'white man's burden' to impose civilization on that fearsome terrain all the more burdensome.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Charles Ingalls decides to move to the Prairies with his family because it was a new place to start a new beginning. He builds his house in the Indian terrain aware of their existence yet unaware of the fact their presence might be resented by the Indians. In fact, such thoughts never came in the minds of the settlers for whom Canada was 'uninhabited.' The first encounter of the family with the Indians takes place at a time when the Ingalls have already been successful in building their house and settling down. The Indians barge in to disrupt their lives. The first description is from the little girl Laura's mouth: "They were tall, thin, fierce-looking men. Their skin was brownish-red...their eyes were black and still and glittering, like snake's eyes... 'Indians!' Mary whispered. Laura was shivery" (Ingalls 93-94).

The colonizer's gaze over the bare body of the Indian identified it as a repulsive object. All the descriptions in this text are from the point of view of children, more specifically female. How the white woman, the bearer of the legacy of white civilization, looks at the 'other' since

childhood, how she is taught to consider the ‘other’ as repulsive and dangerous is to be noted here. To the white settlers in Canada, these ‘others’ were far from exotic, rather they felt “we don’t want to make enemies of any Indians” (99) and that is why they tolerated their harassments which included entering their house, eating their stuff and creating nuisance with the horrible smell of their skunk skins that they wore round their waists. Though Laura’s father kept on repeating, “The main thing is to be good terms with the Indians” (110) the reality was not that easy. As the War of Independence progressed more towards the victory of the freedom fighters of America, the soldiers started to drive out the settlers of the Indian Territory because the Indians resented their presence. In desperation Laura’s mother cried out, “But not after what we have done for them!”

Little House on the Prairie ends not with a bang but with the thought “It’s a great country...but there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day.” After wasting one whole year and trying to settle down in the Prairie in vain, the Ingalls family finally leaves the Prairies. Succumbing to the pressure of the wild Indians, the book ends not on a note of hope or triumph but retreat, as is typical of authentic ‘Canadian’ texts. Margaret Atwood in her seminal work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) has pointed out that all essentially Canadian texts focus on the inability to survive and end in doom and despair. *Little House* lays that blame on the Indians.

Walter J. Edmonds’ *The Matchlock Gun* (1941) fetched him recognition for his contribution to American Children’s Literature. His earlier publication *Drums along the Mohawk* (1936) was also about the Mohawk community, but *the Matchlock Gun* is set in 1756 when the Indians were fighting against the French in Guilderland, New York. The ‘Foreword’ to the book says that it is based on true incidents and the entire story is about protecting the family and the house from the attacks of the Indians. The central character, ten-year old Edward and his mother Gertrude face all kinds of dangers to save the old Spanish matchlock gun with which they were determined to protect their house from the Indians and finally they were saved by the military. Unlike Laura Ingalls, Walter Edmonds’ novel ends on a note of optimism where the Indian revolt is crushed and order won over anarchy.

All children’s stories are basically aimed at promoting a kind of order -- the good triumphs over the evil, order prevails over anarchy. In the cases of the texts I chose to analyze,

the Indian is the ‘evil’, their ways are those of disorder and anarchy. Hence, crushing their rebellions and upholding the Eurocentric way of life is instilled into young minds through children’s adventure stories such as these. The community narratives of the First Nations, their creation myths are never talked about outside academic circles. Their moccasins and beads are used as characteristic markers to describe them but how their hunting was banned leading to the loss of their moccasin trade and how their beadworks and handicrafts are exploited by the consumerist white market remain unknown to the public. How laws were passed to snatch their children from them to be put up in Residential schools and into foster homes – such stories and memoirs never reach our children. We hardly ever talk about the Native art of story-telling and their ‘tricksters’ like Nanabush, Raven and Coyote. We have perpetuated in the minds of our children the same age-old stereotypical image of the war-hungry, blood-thirsty, starving, naked body of the Indian. Apart from these classics, white literature to this date hardly shows any tendency to incorporate any change in its attitude towards the ‘others.’ It is high time we re-consider and re-read the texts we have been so used to enjoying and ask our children to start thinking.

I would like to end with this. Lee Maracle, the noted Métis story-teller and writer wrote on her Facebook on March 22, 2021:

Pretendians. First, we are not Indians unless we have origins in India. Indigenous people of the Americas are either indigenous or they belong to a nation...we didn’t give ourselves the moniker of “Indian.” An opportunistic and brutal explorer from across the Atlantic did. It stuck for 500 years. It’s meaningless...I’m Métis and Cree. Not Indian.

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