Display of identity of British emigrants in Canada in the ethnic representations

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Abstract. The article examines the ways of representation of Canadian Indians in the texts of British emigrants C. Parr Traill and S. Moodie. The main problem of the research is the manifestation of racial identity in constructing the "Other".

[Kryuchkova N.D., Kasparyan K.V., Milyaeva L.I. **Display of identity of British emigrants in Canada in the ethnic representations.** *Life Sci J* 2014;11(11s):461-464] (ISSN:1097-8135). http://www.lifesciencesite.com. 104

Keywords: colonial discourse, power-dependence, race, identity, the native, immigration

Introduction

The attitude of representatives of different fields of social and humanitarian knowledge to the problem of constructing the "Other" is quite unequivocal. The image of the "Other" is seen as the socio-cultural construct ensuring the realization of important social functions: the establishment of the relationships of power-dependence, provision of social integration and stratification. Maintenance of identity both individual and collective also depends on the way we build relations with the "Other". However, the nature of identity is fragmented, it is determined by the simultaneous belonging of an individual or a group to a variety of communities which tells on the ambiguity and at times inconsistency of the constructed image of the "Other".

In this paper we will try to trace how the construction of the ethnic image displayed the racial components of the British emigrants in Canada. They are two sisters, Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, who are considered to be among the most famous early Canadian writers [1; 2; 3; 4; 5].

British Emigrants in Canada

The girls spent their childhood and youth in the rural county of Suffolk, in the estate Reydon Hall. Here Catherine and Susanna's world outlook was formed, and although they spent most of their lives in Canada, their values and stereotypes, their convictions and prejudices were most closely connected with this estate and the lessons they had been taught there.

Their parents took the upbringing of their children very seriously. This upbringing was conducted in the framework of Evangelism – the religion of hard work and high morality. The girls did not receive formal school education, but they were far more educated than their contemporaries. While their mother was teaching them "woman's skills", their father was supervising their instruction in history, geography, mathematics, was encouraging the girls to watch nature, was developing their independence and the skill to uphold their opinion in discussions.

In the early 1830-s the sisters met their future husbands, John Moodie and Thomas Traill, friends, ex-officers, who were in search of different application of their skills in a peaceful life. They saw emigration as the most feasible way of the realization of their dreams of a comfortable and dignified existence. Their wives who by that time had been actively publishing their works agreed with them about the need for removal. In 1832, the couples, one after the other, left the coasts of Great Britain and headed for Upper Canada.

The early years of their stay in Canada proved to be quite an ordeal for the both families. Hardships and disillusionment with life became the customary complaints of the pioneers who were developing the uninhabited woodland expanses.

The emigrants' isolation in the wood made the system of mutual help exceptionally important. Shared work, the distribution of duties between the members of the community helped reduce the survival risks in the wild forests.

By no means unimportant for the colonists were the contacts with the local population – the Indians of the Ojibwe tribe whom the settlers more often called the Chippewa.

Both Catherine and Susanna left their reminiscences of this period of their life. In 1836 Catherine published her novel "The Backwoods of Canada" [6], consisting of the letters formed up in the chronological succession which Catherine would write to her mother in England. Meetings with the Indians were recorded the moment they took place in real life. Susanna's work "Roughing It in the Bush" [7], published some time later is structured differently, according to the problem principle. The information about the Indians is united in the chapter headlined "The Wilderness and our Indian Friends".

Susanna explains the reason for using representative stories in the following way: "The real character of a people can be more truly gathered from such seemingly trifling incidents than from any ideas we may form of them from the great facts in their history" [7]. At the same time these stories helped future colonists to build relations with the local population. As a result critics sometimes call her novel practical guide to pioneers in Canada [8].

Carol Gerson makes an interesting observation. She analyzed published works and private correspondence of the sisters, and pays attention to the fact that in the former the interest in the Indians is expressed to a much greater extent than in the latter. The researcher explains that the sisters perceived the novels as travelogue, in the first place trying to pay attention to the things not to be found in the homeland. In this they were aimed at the broad reading public's expectations [9]. Indeed, the sisters' works have much in common with the travelogue as they represent the view of the person from a different culture. However Catherine and Susanna were not travelers, they were permanent residents. Building relations with the local Indian tribes relied heavily on and influenced the perception of the "Indian" – as the "Other", as the "Outsider", as the "Foe".

Even before the journey the sisters sympathized with the local population which was explained by the influence of the ideas of humanism. The Stricklands moved to Canada in the years when the abolitionist movement in England had been intensified. The sympathy shown to negroes oppressed by slave traders was projected on all the natives. Both Catherine and Susanna shared the ideas of abolitionism. Susanna was friends with Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, described the stories of the former slaves who were seeking aid from Pringle [10; 11].

It must be noted that the sisters were brought up in the age of Romanticism. The mythologized perception of the natives is characteristic of the romantic literature. They appeared as original heroes living the life of nature, not constrained by the cultural norms, capable of a spontaneous display of feelings, naturally happy unlike the city dwellers of the urbanized Europe. The image of the "Noble Savage", intended to illustrate the inherent virtue of a man prior to his contact with civilization, was created.

The sisters perceived the natives of Canada in the mainstream of this tradition and created the appropriate characters. Naturally, life in the backwoods of Canada was far from being romantic. And the Indians on closer examination proved to be not so heroic and exalted as they were praised in literature. This is confirmed by Susanna who at the very beginning of the chapter dedicated to her Indian friends speaks about the Indians as the people "whose beauty, talents, and good qualities have been somewhat overrated, and shrouded in a poetical interest which they scarcely deserve" [7].

A mild nature of the real experience of the communication between the settlers and the Indians influenced the ways of the representation of the Indians in the works of the sisters. In combination with the attention to the human being so characteristic of humanism, this factor was conducive to the individualization of the characters in the novel. At the same time the novels actively exploit generalizations, create the generalized image of the people formulated in the Singular – "the Indian".

"The Indian" is undoubtedly a "Savage". The qualities symbolizing his closeness to nature, to animals – wild audacity, strength, keen ear, eyesight, the exceptional knowledge of the environment are emphasized. In both works the combinations of words such as "savage", "a poor savage", etc. are constantly used.

The "set" of the Indians' specific traits in the works of Catherine and Susanna is rather established and is reiterated with a slight degree of variation. Both sisters distinguish exceptional honesty as the most brilliant quality: "The genuine Indian never utters a falsehood, and never employs flattery…, in his communications with the whites" [7]. The sisters commend an exceptional artistic taste of the Indians.

Of special attention are the stories about the noble and generous behavior of the Indians as regards the white settlers. Parr Traill recollects the story told her by a missionary about an Indian who in the tough times after the end of the War of Independence found himself in the home of a poor widow and her children, displayed generosity by having laid down his arms, and later they established the most cordial relations [6]. Susanna relates about Snow-storm, who would bring them food because at one time in the past Mr. Moodie had repaired his gun.

Both sisters pay attention to the kindness and tact of the Indians trying to render a service in the most inconspicuous way, their kind disposition and gentleness in the relations with people: "An Indian is Nature's gentleman – never familiar, coarse, or vulgar… He never attempts to help himself, or demand more food, but waits patiently until you perceive what he requires. I was perfectly astonished at this innate politeness, for it seems natural to all the Indians with whom I have had any dealings" [7]. Catherine notes that the question whether they (gentleness and good humour) are "natural to their characters, the savage state, or the softening effects of Christianity, I cannot determine" [6].

The interaction between the Indians and the white settlers was to a great degree based on trust. Catherine describes that while she was in the wigwam as a guest, the local girls were keeping her child amused [6]. Our heroines and their families often distanced themselves from the Indians to a lesser extent, than from the lower classes of their compatriots: "my husband never allowed them (Indians) to eat with the servants…, but brought them to his own table", – writes S. Moodie. Telling the story of how an "unprincipled Irish woman" cheats an Indian squaw who is in a family way, Susanna draws a clear demarcation line between herself and the Irish woman. For her the squaw is to a lesser degree the "Other", than the Irish woman [7].

At the same time the boundary between "We" and "They" is distinctive enough. It is possible that the attempts to protect the boundaries of their own identity account for the sisters' negative attitude to the fact that the Indians started wearing European clothes more frequently.

By interacting with the natives, the colonists firmly established certain models of the relationships of power-dependence. The sympathy for the Indians was displayed from the position of superiority that formed the basis of the imperial mentality. In the clichés like "poor half-civilized wanderers" [6], the European self-conceit shows itself with all evidence, enabling them to speak from the position of judges who know the price of people and things. And the allegation about high moral development of the Indians was quite within the framework of the colonial discourse of the first half of XIX century. Moral superiority by no means meant civilizational superiority. Let's recall that, for example, women in the XIX century were also endowed with much higher moral values than men, which by no means revoked the secondary nature of their social status. The Indians, as the colonists believed, took their inferior position for granted.

The sisters as the representatives of the white race assumed a patronizing attitude with relation to the natives [12]. They took care of the spiritual food of their wards, helped them when they had problems. Often, especially in S. Moodie's work, there are stories about the natives appealing to the colonists for aid when they needed it. That is, the assertion of the power positions was based on the competence of the white settlers. Unlike "competent" Europeans the Indians are depicted as credulous children who are easy to cheat and who need protection and guardianship: "The Indians are often made a prey of and cheated by the unprincipled settlers, who think it no crime to overreach a red-skin" [7].

The scenes that associate the Indians with children are described with indulgent irony and kind humor. Catherine describes how one day she gave a hunter and his son several colour prints portraying fashionably dressed men and women. These prints provoked in the Indians a burst of laughter. "When they left the house they seated themselves on a fallen tree, and called their hounds round them, displaying to each severally the pictures. The poor animals instead of taking a survey of the gaily dressed ladies and gentlemen, held up their meek heads and licked their masters' hands and faces; but old Peter was resolved the dogs should share the amusement of looking at the pictures and turned their faces to them, holding them fast by their long ears when they endeavoured to escape. I could hardly have supposed the grave Indian capable of such childish behavior" [6]. This comparison of the Indians with children was conveyed through the connotations of infantilism. The comparison of the natives with children is one of the most popular Victorian tropes through which the image of the "Other" was constructed. It was often used in the description of a "Noble savage". Subsequently, already in the second half of XIX century, the ideas of childishness were integrated into the social-Darwinist theories.

The conventional ideas of the "primitive" natives in the first half of XIX century included the recognition of the potential equality between "Savages" and Europeans, the backwardness of the natives, but also their ability for improvement. "The Indians are great imitators, – writes Susanna, – and possess a nice tact in adopting the customs and manners of those with whom they associate" [7].

The adoption of Christianity was perceived by the two sisters as a way of the Indians' development. But the results of the Christianization of the Indians are appreciated by them in a slightly different way. Catherine keeps admiring the Indians' "simple piety", notes with satisfaction that the books she has noticed in the hands of the young people having a rest from work are religious hymns and treatises. The characteristics intrinsic in the "Noble Savage" – purity, artlessness, simpleness – are elevated and ennobled by their familiarizing with the religious principles of the European civilization.

Susanna suspects that the Indians' perception of Christianity is superficial and is mixed with pagan beliefs.

On the whole, the sisters regard the influence of civilization as positive. Catherine maintains with joy, that a greater part of Indians "are now converts to Christianity, and making considerable advancement in civilization and knowledge of agriculture" [6]. The negative influence is exercised not so much by civilization as such, as

the "intercourse with the lowest order of civilised men" [7]. The sisters attribute numerous vices developed by Indians, such as alcoholism, sexual dissoluteness to this very fact.

On the other hand the texts abound in frequently expressed misgivings that the Indians as a people are unlikely to withstand the pressure of the white colonists. Susanna Moodie writes: "Often have I grieved that people with such generous impulses should be degraded and corrupted by civilised men; that a mysterious destiny involves and hangs over them, pressing them back into the wilderness, and slowly and surely sweeping them from the earth" [7]. And here is what Catherine writes: "The race is slowly passing away from the face of the earth, or mingling by degrees with the colonists, till, a few centuries hence, even the names of their tribes will scarcely remain to tell that they once existed" [6]. As C. Gerson notes, the very tone of the narrative of the Indians, often elegiac, displays the attitude to the Indians as to something romantic but disappearing. She regards "The Disappearing Indian" as a trope. It became the relic of the past, the substitute for the semi-demolished towers and ancient country-estates of England that were so much lacking in the new World [9]. Indeed, after reading the novels there emerges the feeling that the writers do not correlate the disappearance of the Indians with the activity of the missionary-disposed colonists, like them, or using the expression of Veronica Thompson "settlers-invader" [12]. They do not reflect on the fact that Elizabeth Iron's child dies of tuberculosis – the disease brought in by the European colonists, that where previously the Indians used to pitch their camps, now the settlements where Catherine and Susanna reside are located.

Conclusion

Summing up, we may note, that the image of the natives was constructed by the writers within the framework of the colonial discourse of the end of XVIII – first half of XIX centuries. The "Other" or the "Indian" was represented as a "Noble savage", close to nature, innocent, open, generous, but at the same time primitive and in need of civilizational influence and guardianship on behalf of the Europeans. Thus, the discourse practice designated the system of the relationships of power-dependence between the colonists and those who were colonized. We may also note, that in the representation of the image of the "Indian", the influence of the cultural orientation rather than the sisters' personal peculiarities is far more pronounced. They selected practically one and the same themes for their description, their basic characteristics are actually the same, they use similar rhetorical structures. This example illustrates the extent to which the construction of the image of the "Other" is determined by the discourse frames.

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7/7/2014