



NATIVE AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S SHORT STORY *THE TRIAL OF THOMAS BUILDS-THE-FIRE*

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Abstract

This paper aims to show the representation of Native Americans in Sherman Alexie's short story *The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire*, which is part of his story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). The main character, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, represents native Americans. This paper will analyze Thomas as a subaltern who was oppressed by white hegemony. The presence of fairy tales as media voicing out Thomas' thoughts and feeling as the subaltern interprets something deeper. The present writer will use Gayatri C. Spivak's theories which are subaltern and representation, to analyze the forms of Native American representation. The result shows there are two forms of representation used in the story. They are "to represent," meaning "the idea of representing something," and "re-present," meaning "the idea of bringing back." However, both forms of representation stated in the story failed to make the subaltern speak or be heard.

Kata kunci: fairy tales, Native American, representation, subaltern

Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan representasi penduduk asli atau pribumi Amerika dalam cerpen Sherman Alexie yang berjudul *The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire*, yang merupakan bagian dari buku kumpulan cerita pendek karya Sherman Alexie yang berjudul *The Lone Ranger dan Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). Penduduk asli atau pribumi Amerika direpresentasikan oleh tokoh utama Thomas-Builds-the-Fire. Tulisan ini akan berfokus pada Thomas sebagai subaltern yang tertindas oleh hegemoni kulit putih. Kehadiran dongeng sebagai media yang menyuarakan pikiran dan perasaan Thomas sebagai subaltern memaknai sesuatu yang lebih dalam. Untuk menemukan bentuk-bentuk representasi penduduk asli atau pribumi Amerika akan diterapkan konsep Subaltern dan Representasi oleh Gayatri C. Spivak. Hasil dari penelitian ini adalah ditemukannya dua bentuk representasi di dalam teks, yaitu representasi (*represent*) sebagai "yang mewakili" dan representasi (*re-present*) sebagai "yang menghadirkan kembali". Kedua bentuk representasi yang muncul di dalam teks gagal membuat *subaltern* bersuara maupun didengar.

Keywords: dongeng, pribumi Amerika, representasi, *subaltern*

1. Introduction

The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire short story is one of the short stories collected in Sherman Alexie's book entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). This short story tells the story of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, a Native American who undergoes a Kafkaesque condition, which is a complicated condition due to the accusation of a crime he did not commit. Thomas had to languish in jail and later got sentenced to death because of his storytelling habit, considered by the rulers (whites) as a severe threat covering the facts of the injustices experienced by Native Americans.

In Native American culture, storytelling is part of a tradition holding an essential role in the continuance of their culture. The arrival of European immigrants and their colonialism as a new power often causes the change and destruction of one tradition. That is triggered because migrants have no understanding of indigenous culture and traditions. Carroll (2005), in her article entitled *Ceremonial Tradition as Form and Theme in Sherman Alexie's "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven": A Performance-Based Approach to Native America Literature*, states that a fairy tale in Alexie's collection of short stories is an attempt to redefine the identity of Native Americans. Fairy tales become a link between the past and the present of the indigenous people that tells of the previous triumph of Native Americans. However, this fairy tale is in marked contrast to the new identity of Native Americans ethnicity, which the dominance of white hegemonic has formed.

Regarding the selected short story, *The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire*, previous research has been conducted by Tiffani Reardon (2013). She wrote an essay titled *Thomas Builds-the-Fire as a Community Builder: A Character Analysis of The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven and Smoke Signals*. Reardon seeks to explain the character both in another Alexie's short story and an independent movie which is also based on Alexie's short story, which is named after Thomas Build-the-Fire. The finding of the analysis is that the character, Thomas Builds-the-fire, is described as "a rather complicated character" and a character that is defined to be "the closest to his Indian heritage." The initial idea of Thomas Builds-the-fire character is also seen in *The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire* story.

This research will use the theory of representation to analyze the form of Native American Representation in the short story. Hall (1997) states that "representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (p.183). Hall further explains that producing and exchanging meaning are exercised using language, signs, and images that stand or represent things. In addition, Hall

(1997) proposes three theories regarding the representative system. He divides the theories of representations into three approaches: the reflective approach, the intentional approach, and the constructionist approach. Using a representation theory is also one of the forms in showing that literary works can be a source of knowledge (Young, 1999). Instead of relying on the concept of meaning and truth, Young (1999) argues that the concept of representation can be referred to show the cognitive values of the literary works. From the different approaches of representations above, it can be said that representations can never indeed be real or objective. Instead, they are constructed images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content.

However, the present writer will use the representation theory proposed by Gayatri C. Spivak. Gayatri C. Spivak makes a distinction between *Vertretung* (represent) and *Darstellung* (re-present) to define representation. *Vertretung* (in German word) is defined as “stepping in someone’s place ... to tread in someone’s shoes.” Representation in this sense is “political representation” or speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. *Darstellung* (in German word) is defined as re-presentation, “placing there.” Re-presenting is thus “proxy and portrait.” The complicity between “speaking for” and “portraying” is shown through the main character Thomas Builds-the-Fire in the short story. Therefore, this research aims to show the representation of Native Americans in Sherman Alexie’s short story *The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire*.

2. Methodology

This research uses qualitative research. This qualitative method is a research procedure that produces the data descriptions in written words or writings from people and behavior observed in the story. The research data are words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the short story. The research starts with reading the short story, understanding the concept of representation, identifying the text using Spivak’s theories of subaltern and representation, and analyzing each representation group. The present writer reads, collects, identifies, classifies, and interprets words, phrases, and sentences from the short story related to Native American Representation.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Thomas as Subaltern

The short story, *The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire*, shows a portrait of a distinct class and race between Native Americans and whites. Through the main character, Thomas

Builds-the-Fire, Sherman Alexie seems to reflect the reality of how the lower class (indigenous) becomes the subject of hegemony from ruling classes (whites). In this case, the lower-class group will become the oppressed group and at the same time has no access to hegemonic power or are distinguishably known as the subaltern group. All subaltern groups are included in the oppressed group. However, not all the oppressed groups are subalterns.

According to Spivak (as cited in Kilburn, 1996), a subaltern is a person or group classified as the subordinate. Spivak states, in her book, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" that a subaltern speaks in numerous ways that are not heard. Therefore, there is no transaction between the speaker and the listener. In other words, the subaltern position causes a person or group of people not to acquire a dialogical level of speech. Spivak uses an example of the Indian tradition of *sati* to depict how women are not heard or are in subaltern positions. The tradition of *sati* is that when a husband dies, it is obliged for a wife to burn herself. The wives in Indian society are the subaltern groups or subjects oppressed by prevailing hegemony domination. They practice this tradition of *sati* without ever being asked about their physical and spiritual willingness. Indian women seem to have no right to voice out their desires as individuals who have the right to live. When India was still under British rules, the tradition of *sati* could be understood from two sides. First is from the point of view of the British government considering this practice as the homicide of innocent women, while second is from the viewpoint of Hindu men in India, speaking on behalf of the women, considering *sati* as voluntary action (Maggio, 2007).

Looking to these two forms of representation (Indian women represented by the British government and Hindu men), Spivak argued that postcolonial intellectuals still have colonial tendencies. They have committed to epistemic violence by trying to generalize or hegemonize the diversity of subaltern groups (all Indian women). Therefore, Spivak introduces two forms of representation: "represent" (German: *Vertretung*) and "re-present" (German; *Darstellung*).

In *The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire* short story, the character of Thomas is portrayed as a subaltern character. He becomes the oppressed character in the political hegemony that positions him as the inferior party in the court of law. Thomas, a Native American, was imprisoned for a long time for the accusation he never committed. It is further strengthened by the fact that he has no dialogical level of speech.

"But that crisis was resolved years ago as Thomas surrendered voluntarily and agreed to remain silent. Thomas had not spoken in nearly twenty years. All his stories remained internal; he would not even send letters or Christmas cards."
(Alexie, 1993, p. 66)

Thomas has a subaltern awareness of himself that he is a part of the inferior group, whose voice would never be heard, so he chooses to renounce himself, be in silence, and indeed quietens himself for 20 years. His decision to keep the truth for himself does not mean that he is frightened by the court results. However, he is fully aware of the domination scheme of the political hegemony in court, which is still controlled by the dominant groups (whites).

3.2 Represent

Spivak (in Ashcroft, 1995:71) explains the first form of representation can be interpreted as "representing" or "substituting." The subaltern groups, in this case, cannot represent themselves; they must be represented since they have no access to the hegemonic authority applied in their area. However, Spivak also observes that the party or group representing or substituting the subaltern groups is not fully adequate for precisely asserting the voice of the subaltern groups.

In *The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire*, Thomas's voice is not precisely presented, either by the BIA (Bureau Indian Affairs) or by the court. BIA represents the group of Native Americans' aspirations, including Thomas', yet it is shown as the primary cause of Thomas' affliction and oppression. Thomas is imprisoned for he was thought as the party who ought to be responsible for the escape of the tribal chief's wife, who also serves as chief of the tribal police, David WalksAlong.

She packed her bags the day after she listened to Thomas' speaking. Thomas was arrested the day after Esther left. "Builds-the-Fire has a history of this kind of behavior," a man in a BIA suit said to the others. "A storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need, to tell the truth. Dangerous." (Alexie, 1993, p. 66-67) Thomas often uses fairy tales, to tell the truth of the injustice and oppression felt by the natives. Using the fairy tales, Thomas again wants to demonstrate his inability to vocalize his thoughts and feelings as the subaltern character in the story. BIA is the representation of indigenous groups yet fails conducting its functions. They are trapped in the political hegemony of whites so that they act as though the dominant groups (whites) do. Their self-interests have seared their conscience.

Apart from BIA, the court, which is supposed to be a judicial institution where all state intellectuals fight for justice for the weak, is described as having failed to serve its functions. Through the judges and prosecutors, the court could not represent Thomas on demanding justice for himself. This is under Spivak's statement (Landry, 1996) that all intellectuals

cannot represent the minority groups who are being oppressed. As part of the inferior group, Thomas's status becomes the primary reasoning for a new injustice embodied by the court, part of the dominant groups (whites).

"It has to be a felony charge. We don't need his kind around here anymore. All that was variable on any reservation was how the convicted would be punished." (Alexie, 1993, p. 67) The quotation above shows that as the subaltern group, Thomas has no rights of himself anymore after becoming a convict. The judiciary institution in the text is depicted as a state institution that would always convict all convicts listed in reservation regardless of the truth in the field. The court's duty is described to plot a conviction for the convicts. Thomas, who has been attempting to convey his defense, is shown to be powerless against the domination of white political hegemony.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the self-proclaimed visionary of the Spokane Tribe, was sentenced today to two concurrent life terms in the Walla Walla State Penitentiary. His many supporters battled with police for over eight hours following the verdict. (Alexie, 1993, p. 71)

The quotation above shows that he graciously accepts the court's verdict, which sentences him twice for his never committed accusations. The court seems to neglect the truth wished to be conveyed. Moreover, the court has been ignoring the public rally as well. As a subaltern, Thomas fails to communicate his voice through parties that are representing him.

3.3 Re-present

Responding to the failure of intellectuals who could not be the voice for the subaltern, Spivak offers a concept of the second representation, which is "re-present" (German: *darstellung*), which is expected to be an alternative for delivering the subaltern's voice. Re-present means to bring back or redraw. The "re-present" process in this story is shown by the use of fairy tales as works of art to bring back the facts encountered by subaltern people in the past. This is shown at that time when Thomas testifies in court. He is both a convict who is also testifying the accusations against him. Fairy tales are brought back to colorize Thomas' testimony. In the first testimony, he describes himself as a horse, which is along with the other 799 horses, is viciously taken and slaughtered. Those horses are owned by the chief tribe of Spokane, one of the Native Americans.

"It all started on September 8, 1858. I was a young pony, strong and quick in every movement. I remember this. Still, there was so much to fear on that day

when Colonel George Wright took me and 799 of my brothers captive..."
(Alexie, 1993, p. 68)

Thomas' testimony as a horse that feels terrified when he and the other 799 horses are captured is reflected in the quotation above. Colonel George Wright is a colonel of the ninth infantry who captures those herds of horses. They are not only captured but a large number of horses are also slaughtered because they are considered to be threatening the others of Wright's livestock. Thomas plays the strain, fear, and suffering felt by these horses in his testimony. This implicitly implies that Thomas tries to communicate what the horses have encountered by becoming a part of the horse group. The oppressions which are encountered by the herd of Native Americans' horses are shown again through Thomas' voice. This short story, through a subaltern character, Thomas, seeks to grant a space for the oppressed groups, who are incapable of revealing things in the fight between Native Americans against whites, including the horse that is part of a struggle of Native Americans, to survive the invasion of whites.

The second testimony of Thomas in court is when he tells another tale about Qualchan. Thomas himself utters the battle and the fight Qualchan had.

"My name was Qualchan, and I had been fighting for our people, for our land. It was horrendous, hiding in the dirt at the very mouth of the Spokane River . . . and I was hanged with six other Indians, including Epsel, who had never raised a hand in anger to any white or Indian." (Alexie, 1993, p. 69)

The quotation above is shown to tell that Thomas brings back the story of Qualchan narrated through himself. Through Thomas' testimony, Qualchan reveals how he feels during the fight between Native Americans against whites. Qualchan shows how he was hanged without any judicial process and the other six Native Americans. There is an attempt of bringing back Qualchan's voice; in this case he is also a subaltern character because he is a part of the oppressed group who is oppressed by whites from voicing himself.

The third testimony is Thomas' tale of the Wild Coyote. As a subaltern character, Thomas re-presents the story of the Wild Coyote, a young man who is frightened yet constrained to join in the battle between Indigenous troops and Steptoe troops (whites). "My name was Wild Coyote, and I was just sixteen years old and was frightened because this was to be my first battle...." (Alexie, 1993, p. 70). Coyote is one of the oppressed parties. Since he is young and inexperienced in life, he has to fight for his ethnicity on the battlefield against whites. On defending himself, Coyote is told to have murdered two white men. With the

charge of murdering those two men, Thomas depicts himself as Coyote by being convicted and sentenced twice. Thomas is sentenced not for things he did but for Coyote's actions.

By using these three fairy tales above, Alexie intends to clarify that Thomas, a subaltern, uses other characters to be the voice of what he feels. Yet, the attempt to represent past stories still failed to voice out the inner voice and thoughts of the subaltern group. This is proven by the fact of the court's verdict on him.

4. Conclusion

The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire shows Thomas as a subaltern, the oppressed character who has no access to white hegemonic power. This is confirmed by Thomas' failure on his representation's effort (represent and re-present) in voicing out his thoughts and feelings. There are two forms of Native American representation portrayed in the story. First, the Native American representation is done by the intellectuals, while the other is done by using three different fairy tales, which are the herd of horses, Qualchan, and the Wild Coyote. However, both forms of representation haven't given the Native American, portrayed by the subaltern Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, the opportunity to talk or be heard by any means necessary.

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