



# Sufferings of Indians in James Fennimore Copper's The Last of the Mohicans

Abdullah Jassim Muhamed Banimansoor<sup>a</sup>, Longhai Zhang<sup>a,c\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, College of Foreign Language and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, P R China.

<sup>c</sup> Vice President of Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 363000, P R China.

## Abstract

*The Last of the Mohicans* is the historical polemic of Native Americans, their culture, tradition, sufferings etc. Once the inhabitants of vast territories, they were bound to live pathetic lives as a result of the pains of settlement from the various European forces in the fight of territorial expansion. The researcher will highlight the traumatic experiences like cruelty and fierceness of warfare on vanishing Indians in the selected novel under study. This novel also offers complex and enduring cultural clashes between Indians and the White settlers.

Key words: James Fennimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans, Trauma, Sacrifice

## Introduction:

James Fenimore Cooper is a great American novelist, who was born on Tuesday, September 15, 1789 in Burlington, New Jersey. Cooper brought up in a large family, that he was the eleventh of twelve children. He was the favorite novelist of American generations. He spent most of his life in Cooperstown, which was founded by his father on a property that he owned. His unique form of literature writing distinguished him from other writers of his era. Themes such as natural law, legal rights, the effects of property disputes, and the contrast between wild and life were common in most of his literary works. *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* was published in 1826, it is one of the widely read and analyzed novels in American Literature penned down by James Fennimore Cooper. It considered his master work, which set during the French and Indian War. The novel has brought Cooper's fame and popularity and remains the norm in

most courses of American literature. Undoubtedly, the book has been instrumental in presenting the predicament of native Americans which has been depicted through the unforgettable actions of various characters symbolizing various tribes like Hurons, Mohicans and Iroquois etc. Once the proud owner of their lands, native Americans were driven out by the Whites and they were compelled to live like refugees. They were duped by White people who grabbed their properties. They were also used by British and French forces in wars to enable their sides stronger than the others.

One of the research scholars Varsha Gawri in her thesis entitled *James Fennimore Cooper's leather stocking tales depiction of an open warfare between the Indians and the whites* submitted at Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, India records an authentic account of clashes between White settlers and Indian and its aftermaths. This research paves a way for further inquiry in the aforesaid mentioned topic. The researcher has found it be a background study of the Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Copper.

Robert Miller in his book *The Last of the Mohicans and the New World Fall* highlights the gruesome situation of Indians through the analysis of various major and minor characters and the detrimental events which they were portrayed in. The book also records the historical background of the novel which will aid in deciphering the text. Miller has also talked about the plight of Indians in this book and the wrongs and cruelty meted out to them by the Whites. This paper is an attempt to solving some of the key issues like to underline the traumatic experience of Native Americans. The treacherous treatment of European forces against them. The sacrifice of Indians as portrayed through the art of characterization in the text. Initially, the researcher has built up the background of his study with the preliminary details of Indians in the context of this novel. Some related researchers have also been mentioned by the researcher to have a better grasp on the topic under study. Some hypothetical questions are also put up to set the direction of the study. Some key quotes from the text have been mentioned to corroborate the factual details in the study.

Gaile McGregor believes that the Indian account provided James Fennimore Cooper with multi-dimensional referents to explore their psyche to delve into the existential dilemma of Americans. James Fennimore Cooper has portrayed Indians as displaced people who in spite of being surpassed by Europeans were able to retain their proud spirit. One of the major characters Chingachgook predicts by observing his community's pathetic situation, his premonition stands true when his only son and the last of the Mohicans is killed in the end while saving the life of Cora Munroe.

“The blood of the Chiefs is in my veins where it must stay forever.”

(Wickes, 1907:32)

John Heckwelder in his book describes the heart-wrenching condition of Native Americans in the hands of Europeans. Having being asked for a small land from them, Whites tried to befool them by their shrewd wit and intelligence. They tried to grab their land without their knowledge and made them refugee on their own land. He mentions this in one of the chapters entitled *Indian Account of the First Arrival of the Dutch at New York Iceland*,

The Indians were surprised at the superior wit of the whites,  
but did not wish to contend with them about a little land,  
as they had still enough themselves. The white and  
red men lived contentedly together for a long time,  
though the former from time to time asked for  
more land, which was readily obtained, and thus they  
gradually proceeded higher up the Mahicannittuck, until  
the Indians began to believe that they would soon want  
all their country, which in the end proved true. (72)

James Fennimore Cooper states that The Dutch and Europeans cheated on red Indians illegally depriving them off their land and games which they were proud of possessing. Another advancing nightmare was the brutal carnage of these poor folks by Whites. John Heckwelder provides religious connotations to that bloody incident which took hundreds of lives of red Indians.

Eleven months after this speech was delivered by this  
prophetic chief, ninety-six of the same Christian Indians,  
about sixty of them women and children, were murdered  
at the place where these very words had been spoken,  
by the same men he had alluded to, and in the same manner  
that he had described. (81)

The researcher has found out that there was always an air of suspicion on Indians as White always treated them as their strong counterpart. They didn't want to take any chance with them. In the beginning of the novel, when a group of people was moving towards Fort William Henry, having known the fact that a black will accompany them, One of the daughters of Munroe i.e. Alice was reprimanded Cora for questioning the loyalty of Magua,

“Should we distrust the man, because his manners are not  
our manners, and that his skin is dark!” (25)

Undoubtedly, this revelation corroborates the fact that Whites were indifferent to the black people. Broadly speaking, Cora Munroe becomes the mouthpiece of many European settlers who has hostile attitudes against them.

In the novel too, James Fennimore Copper revives the deep buried mystery which was dug out by many scholars indiscriminately. The novel seems to be a battleground for British, French, and Native Americans to gain the absolute control over North America but in vain. The narrator corroborates this fact in the beginning of the novel. This also alludes to the French and Indian War in 1757 which caused huge damage to the lives of many people.

It was in this scene of strife and bloodshed, that the incidents we shall attempt to relate occurred, during the third year of the war which England and France last waged, for the possession of a country, that neither was destined to retain. (Cooper,1997:03)

Native Americans are shown as sufferers in the novel; some of the major characters like Chingachgook, Uncas and Magua are portrayed as vagabonds fighting to safeguard their honor and dignity. In the course of their struggle, many Indians were displaced from their families, their lands were captured, women were raped and killed brutally and a large number of Indians were traded as slaves in different states around the Europe. Magua is bent on taking revenge from Munroe for his bad treatment to him and his people that is also symbolic of sufferings of innumerable Indians during the war.

Native Americans and innocent Whites lost their lives and families in spite of the fact that they were not involved in the wars. Hawkeye a White character in the novel accepts that it's not only the Native Americans but also the whites who suffered a lot in the clashes among different groups. He assures Chingachhook that he won't leave him alone after his son's death but help in every possible way as they're sailing in the same boat.

The gifts of our colors may be different, but God has so placed us as to journey in the same path ( Cooper,1997:451)

Hawkeye reminisces the time spent with Uncas and rests him assured that he is not alone.

One of the most memorable events in the novel is the death of titular character Uncas who is the 'last' of the Mohican tribe. His father Chingachgook, Hawkeye and Munroes cry over his loss and wish he would not have left them.

“Why hast thou left us, pride of the Wapanachki” (251)

The novel covers the most horrendous period in the lives of Indians. They were subjected to torture, cruelty, and barbarism under the control of European settlers. The researcher has attempted to carry out the microanalysis of this novel in the light of some of the views by various critics and mentioned pertinent quotes to corroborate the fact that Red Indians are subjected to the unlikely treatments. In the novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fennimore Copper depicts various distinct stories of sufferings associated with each Indian character like Chingachgook who suffers immensely due to the impact of wars on his community and struggles a lot to bring up his only child that is Uncas. The death of his son is one of the emotional incidents in the story which aggravates his suffering.

Uncas can be regarded as the savior in the story who lays down his life for a white girl as he seems to be fallen in love with her. He also encounters innumerable unprecedented situations like helping his people against the attacks from Hurons and Europeans. Finally, he remains the last surviving member from Mohican tribe. One of the major objectives of this paper is to present the gist of the plights faced by Indians which has been duly summarized by the researcher in this study.

## Conclusion

Taking into account the vastness and severity of this study, the researcher has undertaken a microanalysis of the sufferings of native Americans. This has been one of the worst nightmares in the history of America. James Fennimore Cooper has used authentic sources for the composition of this novel *The Last of the Mohicans*. The researcher has delved into the various events in the lives of native American characters which directly or indirectly shaken their whole existence.

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