Faulkner's Depiction of Indians

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Introduction

In terms of ethnicity, Faulkner studies have been drawn to a great degree to African Americans, but hardly to Native Americans. Compared with a great amount of scholarship on African Americans in Faulkner's stories, there is very little about Native Americans: in book-form scholarship, *The Indians of Yoknapatawpha* by Lewis Dabney is the only one, published in 1974, while many scattered short monograms and magazine articles can be found, most of which incomprehensively discuss only one or two short stories featuring Native Americans[1].

Turning our eyes to Faulkner's world, however, so many Indians can be found either in his short or long stories that I can say that Faulkner has depicted various types of Indians with a clear intention of giving them the historical position as the first settlers in his Yoknapatawpha County.

As Faulkner's Indian stories, four short stories are most popular: "Red Leaves," "A Justice," "Courtship," and "Lo!," which are included in the "Wilderness" section of *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, but Indians are also mentioned in his long stories, such as *Go Down, Moses, Requiem for a Nun, the Sound and the Fury, the Town, and the Reivers*, and Indians appear as major characters in such short stories as "Mountain Victory," "Fox Hunt, and "Hellcreek Crossing." In "The Appendix" to *the Sound and the Fury*, for example, Faulkner calls Ikkemotubbe "A dispossessed American king,"(225) explaining how the Compsons are closely connected with Indian families in terms of land[2]; *Requiem for a Nun* opens with a historical episode about how Chickasaw's trading post is changed into the Yoknapatawpha County courthouse, mentioning the "dispossession of Indians"(2) and the commercial exchange between Indians and white people.

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[1] Donald Kartiganer in "the Opening Remark" of the 2000 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference whose main topic is "Faulkner in the 21st Century" says that Native Americans will be one of the "new attentions" of Faulkner studies, and that their "presence in Faulkner's works is both substantial and largely ignored by critics"(xix). In addition, the 2003 issue of the *Faulkner Journal,* which features Native Americans, covers nine articles.

[2] This land is meaningful in *the Sound and the Fury*: it is remembered by Benjy as a "pasture" in his mind, and later is sold as a golf field for Quentin to go to Harvard. *Requiem for a Nun* narrates how the first Compson obtains the land from Ikkemotubbe : "Compson, who had come to the settlement a few years ago with a race-horse, which he swapped to Ikkemotubbe, Issetibbeha's successor in the chiefship, for a square mile of what was to be the most valuable land in the future town of Jefferson"(13). Furthermore, in "A Justice," Quentin, the narrator, hears Sam Fathers say that Sam's mother, a black, is sold by the Compsons(*CS* 344). Thus, Quentin knows that his family is deeply connected to Indian history.

Recollecting the word "Yoknapatawpha," in the first place, comes from Indians' language[3], we can say that Faulkner has a clear intention of locating them as the first people of his fictional world.

In starting our discussion on Indians in Faulkner's stories, two simple questions are instantly raised. The first question is related with a curious fact that Faulkner is historically and politically inaccurate in depicting Indians, as many critics point out. Gene Moore, for example, asserts as follows[4]:

> Faulkner's "Indians" are often found to be historically inaccurate and felt to be politically incorrect. His Choctaws might as well be Chickasaws, and both cultures are defined chiefly in terms of their ignoble infatuation with the trinkets and customs of the white man. Worse yet, he paid little attention to the calamities of Removal and the Trail of Tears. (3)

Asked about this inaccuracy, Faulkner candidly admits this and says, "I made them up"(Dabney 11), which seems to mean that the Indians in Faulkner's stories are a product of the author's imagination and that his intention does not lie in an exact reproduction of Indians' history. Then, what is Faulkner's intention of his Indian stories? --this is my first question.

The other question I would like to pose about Faulkner's depiction of Indians lies in the fact that they generally look "tragic-comic." This is quite unique in the American depiction of Indians, because it is commonly assumed that Indians are regarded and depicted as either tragic victims or majestic heroes. The tragic image of Indians is based on historical slaughters in American history, as is known by the Trail of Tears, the Wounded Knee Massacre, etc. The majestic image, on the other, is associated with the Romantic creation of Indians as "noble savages," as is shown in many American literary texts made by Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Despite these stereotypical images of Indians, why does Faulkner depict the "vanishing Americans" with a comical touch?

Focused on these two questions, this paper will clarify Faulkner's intention in depicting Indians with a comical touch and, in consequence, their significance in his fictional world.

I. Comical Touch

In the "Introduction" to *Faulkner and Humor,* Doreen Fowler analyzes Faulkner's comic vision as "a more balanced perspective from which to view tragic events"(xiii). "Comic elements," Fowler explains, "function to temper emotionalism"(xiii). This is true of Faulkner's depiction of Indians. This section will closely analyze several types of comic images of Indians and elucidate truths in his Indian stories.

In the Indians in Faulkner's stories, there is an undertone of tragedy, but, as Karen Rhodes[5] and Lothar Hönnighausen assert, they are described as comical and display a humorous

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[3] "Yoknapatawpha" is a Chickasaw word derived from the name of the river flowing in the south of Lafayette County. Etymologically, "yokna" means land, and "patawpha," split. Faulkner explains the name literally means "water runs slow through flat land"(*Faulkner in the University* 74).

[4] Horsford also comments: Faulkner "shows very little familiarity with early Mississippi history or with the Choctaws and Chickasaws who were its victims"(311).

[5] Rhodes also remarks: "we read it as a tragicomic depiction of Southern grotesque"(69).

tone. In fact, “Courtship” can be called a tall tale, and most of these stories contain such typical elements of Southwestern humor as exaggeration, violence, and tumult. Let us take a closer look at comic elements of these Indian stories in three categories---irony, satire, and parody.

(1) Irony

What white people regard as natural and reasonable looks incomprehensible and even foolish to the Indians’ eyes. In “Courtship,” for example, an Indian gives a deeply sarcastic eye to white people’s regulations: claiming the land by drawing invisible lines on it to divide it, and killing their fellows in the name of crime:

> Issetibbeha and General Jackson met and burned sticks and signed a paper, and now a line ran through the woods, although you could not see it…. But merely by occurring on the other side of that line which you couldn’t even see, it became what the white men called a crime punishable by death if they could just have found who did it. Which seemed foolish to us…. this land for which, as Issetibbeha used to say after he had become so old that nothing more was required of him except to sit in the sun and criticize the degeneration of the People and the folly and rapacity of politicians, the Great Spirit has done more and man less than for any land he ever heard of. But it was a free country, and if the white man wished to make a rule even that foolish in their half of it, it was all right with us. (“A Courtship” 361-2)

Demarcation in particular is incredible and even ridiculous to Indians, who have no sense of possession of land by demarcation, believing that land belongs to nobody. They conclude that America is a free country, so they are doing whatever they wish to according to their principle of freedom, which gives a very sarcastic comment to America whose motto is freedom. Here we have to be reminded that an American principle of freedom has deprived Indians of their native land and freedom. What white people have done according to their principle of freedom is simply questioned and criticized as absurd by Indians whose lives are based on Nature. The Indian’s comment here gives a bitter irony to white people’s egotistic principle and logic. .

The differences in value system can often display a glaring irony. In “Red Leaves,” which describes Indians’ slavery-based lifestyle imitating white people’s, there is a humorous scene in which they hold a meeting to discuss what to do with the increasing number of black slaves breeding in the village.

> “Raise more Negroes by clearing more land to make corn to feed them, then sell them. We will clear the land and plant it with food and raise Negroes and sell them to the white men for money.”
>
> “But what will we do with this money?” a third said.
>
> They thought for a while. (“Red Leaves” 319)

Indians have introduced slavery, as white people did, but no Indians can give a reply to the fundamental question “what will we do with the money they get?” It may be because they have nothing to buy with money. It is not until they confront this question that they realize they have had no need of slavery. This is quite ironic and, more importantly, this type of irony is essentially

created by the difference in value system between white people and Indians: in substance, the societies of the two races have depended on completely different value systems, so the insensible conversion into a different value system is likely to lead to the destruction of the society. In this sense, Karen Rhode's analysis is much to the point:

> This incongruity of values provides the basis for the story's humour and its tragedy, when the three cultures in this story value the same thing differently. …and these economic value systems highlight the processes of unresolvable differences which form first the grotesque humour and then the grotesque tragedy of "Red Leaves."(70)

Interestingly, the fact that Indians have introduced slavery which is utterly unnecessary to them makes us find that slavery in the Indians' society is a good example of "mimicry" of a postcolonial maxim: the ruled will imitate the ruler's lifestyle. It is important to point out that behind the humor lies a postcolonial relation between Indians and white people.

(2) Satire

The Indians appearing in "Red Leaves," and "Lo!" look grotesque and weird, but they assume a comical touch. In "Red Leaves," the Indians, who depend on slavery, abandoning physical labor and their original nature-based lifestyle, are now undergoing an irreversible deterioration. Those Indians are described with a comical and caricatured touch, and Chief Moketubbe, the symbol of deterioration, presents an ugly, fatty figure:

> He wore a broadcloth coat and no shirt, his round, smooth copper balloon of belly swelling above the bottom piece of a suit of linen underwear. On his feet were the slippers with the red heels. Behind his chair stood a stripling with a punkah-like fan made of fringed paper. Moketubbe sat motionless, with his broad, yellow face with its closed eyes and flat nostrils, his flipperlike arms extended. On his face was an expression profound, tragic, and inert. He did not open his eyes when Basket and Berry came in. ("Red Leaves" 325)

It should be noticeable that Moketubbe, potbellied and motionless, wearing the "slippers with the red heels," is described with quite a comical touch. The comical depiction of deteriorating Indians lays bare to us not only a sin of white people who have uprooted Indians' nature-based life by bringing in slavery., but also Indians' foolish ease with which to resign their original lifestyle. It creates a bitter satire aimed at both races. Faulkner discloses truths hidden in a tragedy by adding a comical touch.

(3) Parody

"Lo!" can be classified as a parody of a historical fact[6]: President Jackson, the ruler, is described as timid, whereas Indian chief Francis Weddel, the ruled, is stately. In this story, the ruler and the ruled are depicted in a perfectly reversed position displaying a historical parody, as Hönnighausen also points out: " 'Lo!' is a text that…rewrites a tragic chapter of history as burlesque

[6] In "Lo!," the seventh president Andrew Jackson(1767-1845) is a model of the President, and a Choctaw chief Greenwood Leflore(1800-65), Weddel.

comedy and transforms the victim into the victors"(339). It is a historical fact that the Indian race was conquered by the white race, but it is ironic that on the individual level, the Indian chief is statelier than the white leader. Therefore, though the chief calls themselves "poor innocent Indians,"(398) from his true recognition of the reality, he sounds pretty ironic[7].

In "Lo!," we can find another parody in Indians' clothes. The Indians are dressed in a very humorous fashion; they wear a formal coat, but no trousers, with shoes in one hand and trousers under their arm:

> --in their new beavers and frock coats and woolen drawers. With their neatly rolled pantaloons under their arms and their virgin shoes in the other hand; dark, timeless, decorous and serene beneath the astonished faces and golden braid, the swords and ribbons and stars, of European diplomats.
>
> The President said quietly, "Damn. Damn. Damn.("Lo!" 384)

Their fashion represents a power relation between Indians and white people: therefore, in order to follow the ruler's principle, the Indians try to imitate the white people's fashion, but the mimicry here is so incomplete that it injects sharp humor.

It should be noted here that this kind of humor is felt by the reader, not by any characters in the story. When the white people see those Indians in the White House, the Indians, especially their clothing, offer irritation and even threat to the white people, as the President utters many times over his shoulder, "Damn!". In this respect, Bruce Johnson's comment is true: "the mimicry in this story is used as a means of communication with the white race, but it creates a hostile threat against the white people"(Bruce 23). Thus, it is interesting to say that mimicry in "Lo!" can be used as a parody of the power relation. Nevertheless, the historical fact cannot be changed, as the story ends with the possibility of military ascendance over the Indians, displaying a tragic tone behind the humorous atmosphere.

II. Faulkner's Voice

The results of the analysis of Faulkner's humorous depiction of Indians in the previous section can be summarized into the following two points:

(1) A strong reproach against the white people who have depraved the Indians:

The humor of these Indian stories reproaches the white people who have plundered the Indians' land and civilized them. In this respect, we can hear Faulkner's reproachful voice. In 1937 when he drove in an Arizona desert and passed a group of Indians sitting by the highway, Faulkner said to Ben Wasson: "This was theirs….all of it. This whole country. We took it from them and shoved them off onto reservations"(*Biography* 383). Faulkner keenly feels guilty of white people's sin of

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[7] According to Dabney, the title "Lo!" is derived from a verse of "An Essay on Man" by Alexander Pope(44). It says, "Lo! the poor Indian, whose untutor'd mind/Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;/His sound proud Science never taught to stray/Far as the solar walk, or milky way"(355). Pope's image of Indians is lofty and it matches the stately behavior of the Indians in "Lo!"

taking their land. With his sense of sin, the Indians in his stories are depicted.

(2) Innocence of the Indians who have imitated the white people's value

The white people's sin is doubtlessly grave; however, Faulkner thinks the Indians are so innocent as to accept the white people's value with no thought of the consequence. Slavery and material civilization are not what they need, and what is worse, these factors play a destructive role of uprooting their original lifestyle and value. From a practical viewpoint, when they accepted heterogeneous values, they should have gained enough knowledge and vision to compete with the white people on the same ground. On the contrary, they have innocently imitated the white people's lifestyle and culture, and in consequence, their innocence has been easily manipulated and exploited for the white people's benefits. Faulkner points out Indian's innocence which has led to their loss of culture and identity.

This opinion is supported by the fact that Faulkner creates some Indians who, getting some knowledge from white people's culture, still have a dignified pride as Indians. Saucier Weddel in "Mountain Victory," for example, is so educated in white people's schools that he can succeed in business, and yet he has a high pride as an Indian and serves in the Civil War as a Confederate major. He chooses to gain education in the white people's society instead of following blindly the Indian's hereditary system only to go to ruin with the tide of the times, as Weddel himself explains:

> "In the old days The Man was the hereditary title of the head of our clan; but after we became Europeanised like the white people, we lost the title to the branch which refused to become polluted….." ("Mountain Victory" 333)

Weddel's father is Choctaw chief Francis Weddel, who argues fairly and squarely with President Jackson in "Lo!" Weddel is as dignified and brave as his father, but he is not innocent, but realistic: Weddel tries to survive in the white people's society with the same recognition of reality that Indians are destined to disappear, as his father shows in "Lo!": "We are but Indians: remembered yesterday and forgotten tomorrow."("Lo!" 396)

Another dignified and realistic Indian character is Sam Fathers. He is actually a hybrid descendant of three races—Indian, white and black races, and is forced to live alone as a marginal man in the white-dominated South, but Faulkner depicts him with a dignified touch and casts him as a mentor for Ike McCaslin:

> It was Sam Fathers, the negro, who bore himself not only toward his cousin McCaslin and Major de Spain but toward all white men, with gravity and dignity and without servility or recourse to that impenetrable wall of ready and easy mirth which negroes sustain between themselves and white men, bearing himself toward his cousin McCaslin not only as one man to another but as an old man to a younger. (*GDM* 170)

It is noticeable that these three persons we have found as dignified Indians are all mix-blooded: both Saucier and Francis are half-Indian and half-French. The Indians conquered have no choice but to survive as mix-blooded. Mixed-blooded people are oppressed by a cruel fate in the South, but they retain pride, dignity and humility to endure their cruel fate. This can be shown as a strong antithesis Faulkner proposes to the pure-blood supremacy in the South.

III. Indian Identity

In this section, we will discuss why Indians encounter the fate of vanishing from an ethnic viewpoint. The main reason is that the white people have dispossessed the Indians of their land. For Indians, the land is the basic keystone they have lived on and taken over from generation to generation. Jean O'Brien explains Indians' inseparable relation with land:

> For the English, land was central to identity and place in society.…For Indians, land was something much more essential. Land also signified identity for Indians, but in a fundamentally different way than it did for the English. For Indians, land meant homeland, which conferred identity in a corporate and religious sense, and it contained the crucial kinship networks that inscribed their relationships on the land. As English colonization proceeded, land also became a commodity for Indians. Eventually, it became a source of social welfare, which completed the process of dispossession…. (O'Brien 211)

As O'Brien points out, land defines Indians' identity. It follows that if they lose their lands, they will lose their identity as Indians. The loss of identity will lead to the vanishing of the race. Faulkner keenly realizes the white people's dispossession of Indians' land as a capital sin as follows:

> I think the ghost of that ravishment lingers in the land, that the land is inimical to the white man because of the unjust way in which it was taken from Ikkemotubbe and his people. That happened by treaty, which President Jackson established with the Chickasaws and the Choctaws, …There are a few of them still in Mississippi, but they are a good deal like animals in a zoo: they have no place in the culture, in the economy, unless they become white men, and they have in some cases mixed with white people and their own conditions have vanished, or they have mixed with Negroes and they have descended into the Negroes' condition of semi-peonage. (*Faulkner in the University* 43)

Faulkner thinks Indians whose lands are lost have "no place in the culture, in the economy," and "ghost of that ravishment" is lingering in the South. In the same way, in Faulkner's fiction, in which land is one of his major themes, land is regarded as everyone's property, not any individual's, as is shown in *Go Down, Moses*:

> ---it belonged to no man. It belonged to all; they had only to use it well, humbly and with pride.(*GDM* 354)

As is discussed in the previous section, land is for Indians a fundamental basis for living and in essence, they have no idea of possessing land, whereas the white people have deprived them of their land which is exploited for an individual's property and speculation[8]. As a result for Indians, they

[8] In the opening of "The Bear," the big woods, which belong to nobody, are also exploited for speculation: "It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document:--of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey"(*GDM* 191). In addition, in "Lo!" the same idea is mentioned: "*Another white man came among us, to hunt in peace we thought, since God's forest and the deer which He put in it belong to all. But he too became obsessed*

are forced to change their lives from the hunting economy based on land into the monetary economy preying on land, which makes Indians go to ruin. This is what Ike calls "the curse on the South."

> 'Dont you see?' he cried. 'Dont you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse?'(*GDM* 278)

Ike decides to relinquish his right to inherit the land to sever such a sinful chain. In this respect, Toshio Koyama's view is most suitable: "Faulkner places Indians' destiny as an important phase in American history by penetrating to the roots of avarice, frailty and other human fundamental evils in our bosoms"(131). Thus, Faulkner's Indian stories show that the white people's deprivation of Indians' land is not merely a problem of the two races, but a fundamental problem rooted in the South.

Conclusion

Before Faulkner, many other American writers deal with Indians, and in most cases they depict them either as noble savages or as poor victims. Faulkner, however, depicts them with a humorous touch in order to reveal some truths behind the vanishing of the Indians.

Faulkner's comical depiction of Indians reveals a strong irony to both the white race and the Indian. On one hand, Faulkner gives a strong reproach to the white people who have emasculated Indians by usurping and speculating their land, God's possession and their identity. On the other, he offers a bitter irony in describing Indians' innocence of imitating the white people's lifestyle. Adding a comical touch, he tries to disclose the objective aspects of Indian problems, relinquishing too much sympathy and emotionalism.

Faulkner aims to set Indians as pioneering people in the history of Yoknapatawpha. Faulkner, by inserting Indians minutely in his long and short stories, tries to give a huge ethnic group of Indians a position in American history--especially in the southern history, considering why and how they are destined to decline and disappear. Problems related with Indians are found to be deeply rooted in the South, as Ike and Quentin manage to hand them down from generation to generation with acute suffering: Indian problems will not end with the disappearance of the race. Indians play an important role and give historical and thematic consistency in the world of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

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with the idea of owning this ford, having heard tales of his own kind who, after the curious and restless fashion of white men, find one side of a stream of water superior enough to the other to pay coins of money for the privilege of reaching it. ("Lo!" 401)

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