A Study of Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* as American Decolonization: Dialectic Encounter Between Europe and Wilderness (America)

Hajiali Sepahvand

1 Hajiali Sepahvand is an instructor at Payame Nor University, Khoram Abad, Iran. His main areas of research are Criticism, Novel and drama. He holds a B. A. and M.A in English Language and Literature and he is pursuing his studies in PhD level at National Academy of Sciences in Armenia. English Department, Faculty of Arts, Khorramabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khorramabad, Iran.

1 Corresponding author.

Address: Iran, Lorestan province, Khoram Abad city, Goldasht, Karimkhian Zand Street, Pasdaran region, Noryazdan alley, no. 4, Zip Code: 6818945555.

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Abstract

This study tries to show decolonization in Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. As a social process, decolonization serves emancipation of colonized nations to get their cultural independence. In literature as a basic component of culture, this process is operated through some strategic techniques as appropriation which is capturing the language of Imperialism (English), transforming it into English to bear the burden of one’s own cultural experience and abrogation which is undermining the axiomatically superiority of Imperial culture. Through exceedingly detailed scrutinizing the above mentioned novel based on this approach, the research shows that how Cooper masterly undermines and abrogates European superiority by introducing American independent hero as open minded character or symbol of melting pot as a cultural elements and shortcoming of European; thus, he inaugurates American agency.

Key words: Abrogation; Agency; Appropriation; Decolonization

INTRODUCTION

The study starts with a brief introduction to decolonization, its strategies, and the analysis of Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* by tracing the above mentioned elements as decolonization in it.

1 DECOLONIZATION AND ITS STRATEGIES IN LITERATURE

As the very practical advantage of post-colonial discourse, decolonization is the only process of removing the heavy exploitation of empire colonization which is the invasion of the colonized countries both culturally and naturally. But to comprehend decolonization as the central concern of the article, at first it is reasonable to discuss the notion of decolonization itself. Then, various kinds of decolonization including Early, Present, in Settlers and Invaded colonies as well as strategies, and colonies will be delivered. Consequently, decolonization in the settler colonies will be followed by analysis of Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* as the embodiment of this process.

1.1 A Glance on Decolonization

Decolonization, in general, is a revolt, weather implicit or explicit, against imperial axiomatically legitimized domination. In other words, it is a kind of awareness against oppression and inferiority like what was done in Marxist movement against master class by slaves (working class) or by Feminist against patriarchal societies. Being different in various involvement and engagement stages, like them, decolonization is divided into two waves: the early phase, as will be referred to in the next parts, which was put forward by African decolonizers derived from the works of political theorists like Frantz Fanon (1959, 1961) and Albert Memmi (1965) who located its principal characteristic in the notion of the imperial–colonial (colonizer-colonized) dialectic itself. In this respect, The
early involvement and engagement of decolonization as Ashcroft and et al. puts, is ‘a profound complicity with the imperial powers from which they sought to emerge as free agents’ (2007, p.56), that is, freedom and emancipation as free subject. Fanon, writing in the 1950s during the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonial rule, through psychoanalysis of colonial subject produced the ways in which the colonial subject’s identity is constructed by the colonist. In his famous and influential essay (Fanon, 1986, p.109–40), Fanon shows the effects of racism on the construction of the subject and the production of identity. In this essay which is an interior monologue, Fanon uses the constructed identity of the oppressed narrator by the racist oppressors as: ‘Dirty nigger!’, ‘Negro!’ and eventually he puts this construction as the construction of an object among the other objects not a subject:

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into this crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. . . .I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self (1986, p.109).

On the whole, early decolonization seeks to invert the structures of domination and substituting the tradition of the colonized nations in place of imperial-dominated canon. Therefore, the early decolonization is dialectic of subject/object, self/other which is resulted in a national revolt and in Parry term ‘nationalist liberationist narratives’…(1987, p.37).

But in the present or advanced wave decolonization criticism is extended by Edward Said into the area of challenging and undermining absolute and axiomatic principles upon which the world classification into superiority of the occident and inferiority of the orient is established. Such classifications in Said’s view are man-made, not absolute (1978, p.5); therefore, they are used for domination by Europe. Thus, decolonization has turned away from simple inversions towards a questioning of forms and modes, to unmasking the assumptions upon which such canonical constructions are founded in a way that it moves first to make their cryptic bases visible and then destabilizes them as Ashcroft and et al. puts it:

decolonization is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved. Initially, in many places in the colonized world, the process of resistance was conducted in terms or institutions appropriated from the colonizing culture itself… (2007, p.56-7).

1.2 The Setter and Invaded Colonies

Complexity of imperialist strategies and different geographical location of colonized countries calls the necessary of various kinds of colonization and colonies. In other words, regarding its benefits and revenues, Imperialism invades some countries, while at the same times, as Ashcroft and et al. put, it occupies the others: …the settler colonies and the invaded colonies. In the case of the settler colonies like the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, land was occupied by European colonists who dispossessed and overwhelmed the Indigenous populations…. invaded societies like those in India or Nigeria, where indigenous peoples were colonized on their own territories’… (2004, p.24).

In both cases, empire imposes its own superiority and domination through its language. This triumph is achieved through introducing English as intermediate and standard language and the writers are the subjects upon whom empire does it. Explaining this phenomenon, Maxwell demonstrates it as:

there are two broad categories. In the first, the writer brings his own language – English – to an alien environment and a fresh set of experiences: Australia, Canada, New Zealand. In the other, the writer brings an alien language – English – to his own social and cultural inheritance: India, West Africa. Yet the categories have a fundamental kinship… . (1965, p.82–3).

However, empire knows how to control and invade each nation.

1.3 Decolonization and its Strategies in the Setter Colonies

As was discussed, in the settler colonies like the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, land was occupied by European colonists, who dispossessed and overwhelmed the Indigenous populations. Therefore, in these colonies, decolonization which is possible through Agency, Nationalism, Appropriation and Abrogation is different from the invaded colonies. In such colonies, according to Ashcroft and et al.,

the first task seems to be to establish that the texts can be shown to constitute a literature separate from that of the metropolitan centre. A vast and impressive body of literary histories, thematic studies, and studies of individual literary traditions has accrued over the last one hundred and fifty years or so in the white cultures of settler colonies. The task of compiling a national literary history has usually been an important element in the establishment of an independent cultural identity (2004, p.131).

This decolonization which was the concern of early decolonizers can be seen in H.M. Green (1961); Carl F. Klinck (1965), a large body of text in the United State (Russell Reising, 1978), and many others. Thus, the early stage of decolonization is a kind of consciousness through which settler colonized people perceive themselves as individuals who can freely and autonomously initiate action and construct their own identity, that is, Agency, which in Ashcroft’s and et al. view refers to the ability to act or perform an action. In contemporary theory, it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed. Agency is particularly important in post-colonial theory because it refers to the ability of post-
colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power’ (2007, p.6).

In the later stages some decolonizers try to develop their self-assertion through independent national literature in a controversial way as in L. Kramer (1981), W.H. New (1989), and Charles Brockden Brown (1799) in America. But, the problem to which they meet is lake of a national and local language as their own language. In other words, the language through which they want to establish and express a separated independent national cultural identity is metropolitan language:

The colonial writer does not have words of his own....Try to speak the words of your home and you will discover -- if you are a colonial -- that you do not know them. ...perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to find words for our spacelessness... Instead of pushing against the grain of an external, uncharged language, perhaps we should finally come to writing with that grain’ (Lee, 1974, p.162,163).

Therefore, the real concern is the control over the means of communication, that is, power of writing in the colonial situation as has been discussed in The Conquest of America by Tzvetan Todorov (1974). But how is it possible while the only dominant language as the medium of power is the language of the centre? In other words, post-colonial writing only can defines itself by seizing the language of the centre: ‘The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place’ (Ashcroft, 2004, p.37). It is because language is the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and conceptions of truth, order, and reality become established. Post-colonial writing is going to reject such power and, therefore, post-colonial writing is the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been seized from the dominant European culture. Post-colonial writing does this through two process of

‘the abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’ involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication’ and ‘the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words. It is a vital moment in the de-colonizing of the language and the writing of ‘English’, but without the process of appropriation the moment of abrogation may not extend beyond a reversal of the assumptions of privilege, the ‘normal’, and correct inscription, all of which can be simply taken over and maintained by the new usage (Ashcroft and et al., 2004, p. 37).

Therefore, post-colonial text is itself a site of struggle for linguistic control which is resulted in the appropriating discourse. This struggle extends to the disputes concerning theme, form, and genre definition, implicit systems of manner, custom, and value.

Now, the question is that may we say that language constitutes reality? Paradoxically, the answer is yes! But where is the center of reality, that is, its axiomatic center according which the other realities by other languages are constructed? The answer is that there is not any centre of reality just as there is not any pre-given unmediated reality and control over the means of communication determines the center of reality; therefore, the colonized nations through appropriation of language of metropolitan centre- ‘to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own’ (Rao, 1938, p.vii), or makes it ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience (Achebe, 1975, p.62) -- and self-assertion abrogate its centrality and they define themselves as the centre and they may reconstruct reality according to their own pattern of conventions, expectations, and experiences, that is, establishment of the link between the received English and place or in Emerson’s phrase, their ‘original relation with the universe’ (Emerson, 1836, p.21).

In a sense, eventually, abrogation through appropriation, which was operated by some decolonizers, is a kind of deconstruction. Because they use language in a way which disrupts its binary structuration. This pattern of binary structuration in European and many other languages, for such critics among whom Wilson Harris (1985) is well known, lies at the root of the continual pattern of conquest and domination that has formed the structure of human history; therefore, tracing aporia in such a pattern is possible.

1.4 Decolonization in the Invaded Colonies

Regarding the cases of invaded colonies, decolonization, as was discussed in previous parts, was at first a national movement against colonization by imperialism. Therefore, it was an anti-colonialism movement which was shared by all invaded colonies. Like other movements it was changing and taking many forms so that it could get the freedom of its agents. This procedure has been presented by Ashcroft and et al. as:

...sometimes associated with an ideology of racial liberation, as in the case of nineteenth-century West African nationalists such as Edward Wilmot Blyden and James Africanus Horton (ideologies that might be seen as the precursors of twentieth-century movements such as négritude). Conversely, it may accompany a demand for a recognition of cultural differences on a broad and diverse front, as in the Indian National Congress which sought to unite a variety of ethnic groups with different religious and racial identities in a single, national independence movement. In the second half of the twentieth century, anti-colonialism was often articulated in terms of a radical, Marxist discourse of liberation, and in constructions that sought to reconcile the internationalist and anti-elitist demands of Marxism with the nationalist sentiments of the period (National Liberation Fronts), in the work and theory of early national liberationist thinkers such as C.L.R.James, Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon. ...(2007, p.12).

All highlighted points of this quotation as ideology of racial liberation, recognition of cultural differences, and radical, Marxist discourse of liberation are different
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faces of freedom and emancipation from domination of Imperialism. But the radical question here is that how such emancipation is possible? In other words, how can such nations get their radical liberation while domination of Imperialism is influential everywhere and in every field, that is, culture, tradition, routine life and social conduct? The answer is, at first, implicit in a return to pre-colonial languages. Mostly, as Ashcroft and et al. refers to, in invaded colonized as: ‘African countries and in India, that is in post-colonial countries where viable alternatives to English continue to exist, an appeal for a return to writing exclusively, or mainly in the pre-colonial languages has been a recurring feature of calls for decolonization’ (2004, p.29). Another important basis of decolonization or liberation from domination of Imperialism is recognition of cultural differences which is a kind of cultural and mental decolonization. This is the consequent of the return to pre-colonial language what is in Ashcroft’s and et al. view ‘a return to indigenous languages can restructure attitudes to the local and the indigenous cultures….Thus, decolonizing processes that have advocated a return to indigenous language use have involved both a social programme to democratize culture and a programme of cultural recuperation and re-evaluation (2007, p.57).

2. ANALYSIS OF FENIMORE COOPER’S THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS AS AMERICAN DECOLONIZATION

Abrogating or Undermining English Superiority, in the novel by Cooper, is through portrayal of the shortcoming of Great Britain in the Wilderness and Challenging Manichean Opposition of Europe/Others in the Dialectic between Europe and Wilderness. It occurs in the scene in which the decline of Great Britain’s proud elevation and high character is depicted as: “the imbecility of her military abroad, and the fatal want of energy in her council at home, had lowered the character of Great Britain from the proud elevation on which it had been placed by the talent and enterprise of her former warriors and statesmen (Cooper, 1826, p.6).” Moreover, Cooper draws England incapability in Wilderness and uncovers their elaborative and experienced choice of the army to develop their certain and unquestionable invincible superiority as: “they had recently seen a chosen army from that country, which, reverencing as a mother, they had blindly believed invincible-an army led by a chief who had been selected from a crowd of trained warriors, for his rare military endowment…”(Cooper, 1826, p.6), while at the same time, he declares their incapability in wilderness: “disgracefully routed by a handful of French and Indian” (Cooper, 1826, p.6); eventually, he undermines and abrogates this authority and superiority through enhancing American Power which is embodied in the power and courage and bravery of “spirit of a Virginian boy”-Washington-only person who “saved [Britain] from annihilation….“(Cooper, 1826, p.6-7). Cooper challenges Britain as the mother country who “absorbs even the fame [of America], under the system of rule” as “a circumstance worthy of observation” in which “while all America rang with his well-merited reputation, his name does not occur in any European account of the battle; at least the author has searched for it without success” (Cooper, 1826, p.7).

To depict wilderness as a bloodshed battlefield which is the result of European selfish policy, Cooper uncovers their savagery and undermines their legal superiority and rational justification of this savagery under the name of humanity, freedom and the myth of group purity:

numberless recent massacres…fearful tale of midnight murder…
the blood of the timid curdled with terror, and mother cast anxious glances even at those children which slumbered within the security of the largest towns. In short, magnifying influence of fear began to set at naught the calculation of reason, and to render those who should have remember their manhood, the slaves of the basest passions. (Cooper, 1826, p.7)

Such a savagery, for Cooper, questions the calculation of reason and manhood and European slavery of passion as the paradox of Hegelian progress toward total knowledge. Consequently, a target of Cooper’s attacking and highlighting bloodshed in chapters XVIII–XXIII is that he ponders the moral significance of the massacre and he, regardless the time, place, or creed, emphasizes that the slaughter of a woman and child is wrong, that is, abrogating European wars under the names of civilization freedom….Cooper condemns those who practice violence rashly and praises those who remain calm and murder only because necessity demands it.

Describing David Gamut, a tall, ungainly psalmodist (singing-master) ridiculously dressed- and carrying a pitch pipe while riding a mare followed by its young colt, Cooper is going to argue deformity of European religious code in American wilderness that is a fresh start and a piece of natural land without artificial and sever social conventions. It is, actually, dialectic of Civilization and Wilderness or clash between Wilderness which is lack of firm government or social code and European high culture and its deformity:

“being neither idle, seemingly nor very ignorant…[he] was to the last degree ungainly, without being in any particular manner deformed. He had all the joints and bones of other men, without any of their proportions. Erect, his stature surpassed that of his fellows; though seat, he appeared reduced within the ordinary limits of the race. The same contrariness in his members seemed to exist through the whole body.”(Cooper, 1826, p.9)

Gamut follows the profession of the psalmodist, carrying his faith through song into the wilderness; therefore, his aggressive “profession”, that is, “instruction” (p.16) symbolizes the entrance of religion, a European model that enters the blank slate of the New World: “happily, I may say that I utter nothing but the thoughts and wishes of the King of Israel himself….this version which we use in new colonies of England so much
exceed all other versions..."(Cooper, 1826, p.18). But the American frontier is untouched by human culture and the skills of the English have no place in the forests of America.

David Gamut’s religious song, European religion, also becomes ridiculous in the wilderness even by Indian, Chapter XXII, as Magua who has released Gamut only because the Indians thought he was insane after they heard his religious singing.

In Chapters XII–XVII, Cooper openly puts forward free will (pragmatism) and the role of man in shaping his own fate, which is against Gamut’s religious philosophy which is according to the novel Calvinism, when he suggests that the landscape poses real danger. In other words, although the characters have extreme difficulty for traveling safely through the frontier wilderness, they manage to meet the challenges of nature by exploiting nature itself: they take cover under fog, for example, and walk barefoot through the stream to hide their tracks. The ability of the group to prevent the challenges of nature subtly critiques Gamut’s Calvinist doctrines, which include the belief that man’s destiny is predetermined and human action cannot alter it. The group undermines this theory, European beliefs, by forging its own destiny and manufacturing improbable survivals. As a result, the group’s adaptability to its surroundings and Hawkeye’s helping the other characters to achieve improbably suggest that Cooper believes humans do have the ability to determine their own fates.

Challenging European religion by Cooper is plainly expressed through the dialectic encounter between Gamut’s fatalism and Hawkeye’s pragmatism. The challenge, first, occurs in the scene in which Hawkeye asks Gamut’s profession and after getting answer he replies:

"you might be better employed. The young hounds go laughing and singing too much already through the wood, when they ought not to breathe louder than a fox in his cover. Can You use the smoothbore, or handle the rifle?". Gamut answers never and Hawkeye asks him if he can plan a map of wilderness, he says no, only he knows his profession. Hawkeye, with an inward laugh, says: "tis a strange calling!...to go through life, like a catbird, mocking all the ups and downs that may happen to come out of other man’s throat." (Cooper, 1826, p.49)

As a Calvinist, Gamut talks about predestination, the idea that God has a plan for each person and human effort cannot change that plan: "he that is to be saved will be saved, and he that is predestined to be condemned will be damned. This is the doctrine of truth, and most consoling and refreshing it is to the true believer' and he called it as ‘the true spirit of Christianity’ (Cooper, 1826, p.102). Hawkeye perceives his doctrine and says "he has the religions of the matter, in believing what is to happen will happen;...it won’t be long afore he submit to the rationality of killing a four-feet beast to save the lives of human men” (Cooper, 1826, p.42). Thus, the central theme of undermining and abrogating axiomatic and absolute doctrine of truth-that is, European religion-is established and altered by Hawkeye who, unlike Gamut, believes humans do have the ability to determine their own fates.

As the result of a battle, in chapter IX, Gamut...become prisoners by the Hurons and in chapter XII Hawkeye releases Gamut and they argue about the efficacy of prayer-song:

"if advice from one who having lived most of his time in the wilderness....You are welcome to my thought, and...to part with the little tooting instrument in your jacket to the first fool you meet with, buy...we’pon...a horsman’s pistal...you might thus come to some prefarrment;...I should think, your eyes would plainly tell you that a carrion crow is a better bird than a mocking- thrasher. The one will, at least, remove foul sights from before the face of man, while the other is only good to brew disturbance in the wood, by chanting the ears of all that hear them.” (Cooper, 1826, p.102)

Actually he suggests that the skills of Gamut have no place in the forests of America and he cites the pragmatic necessities of battle to urge the psalmist to abandon the useless weapon of the pitch pipe. Resisting Hawkeye’s logic, Gamut responds by citing the religious doctrine of predetermination and Hawkeye says this doctrine “is the belief of knaves, and the curse of an honest man” and rejects such doctrine (Cooper, 1826, p.102), but Gamut wants him to support his idea by “chapter and verse” from holy books that Hawkeye rejects Gamut superstitious pictures and misunderstanding by arguing that “what have such as I, who am a warrior of wilderness, though a man without a cross, to do with books”? and he refers to “too simple and too plain” book “to need schooling” as his real book which is wilderness and nature which is “before [our] eyes” (Cooper, 1826, p.103) by which we can believe in God instead of reading such books. To escape from this faith which came from the ‘light of nature’, Gamut begins singing another song.

The ridiculous description of disguised Gamut, in Chapter XXII, as “converted into four-footed beast....” (Cooper, 1826, p.199) and frequent mockery of his psalmody, as a “hounds”, “belief of knaves”, “carrion crow is a better bird than a mocking- thrasher”... which comes from the mouth of the hero (Hawkeye), suggest that institutional religion should not attempt to penetrate the wilderness and convert its inhabitants. Eventually, the mockery reached to its climax when Hawkeye nearly two times mistakenly kills Gamut who was painted as an Indian with only a scalping tuft of hair on his head (Cooper, 1826, p.179); thus, he (wilderness), symbolically, undermines and abrogates blindly obedience of axiomatically imposed European religion.

By the end of the novel (chapter XXXII, p.304) the Calvinist Gamut, who strikes Magua’s other companion with a rock from his sling, learns to move beyond the rigidity of his religion and become a helpful and
committed ally. He succeeds when he finds the ability to leave behind his fatalistic passivity and adapt to the demands of the forest, that is, the process of very docility is fulfilled; thus, actual Undermining and Abrogating English philosophy and normality occur.

CONCLUSION

In this study, a number of decolonization techniques were applied to Fenimore Cooper’s novel The Last of the Mohicans respectively to see how decolonization can be accounted for in terms of literary development.

In The Last of the Mohicans, the decolonization as proposed by Said and recently by Ashcroft was strategically and essentially used. The important point is that the novel is metaphorically replete with dialectic encounters between America and Europe. In the beginning this dialectic is evident. Therefore, decolonization at least can be applied to this early American novel.

Dialectic encounter between Gamut and Heyward is purposely challenge of European axiomatically superiority in the novel by Cooper in a way that thoughtful readers will notice its significance as soon as they start reading the novel. In this dialectic, shortcoming and weakness of European (Gamut) and temerity, boldness, and impetuosity of American and the Americanhood (Hawyeke) have been depicted.

To actualize abrogation of the absolutely centrality of Europe, we traced how Gamut learns to move beyond the rigidity of his religion and become a helpful and committed ally. He succeeds when he finds the ability to leave behind his fatalistic passivity and adapt to the demands of the forest, that is, the American process of very docility is fulfilled; thus, actual Undermining and Abrogating English philosophy and normality occur.

The important point is that Hawkeye whose particular attitudes and behaviors are Cooper’s purposely establishment of the prototype ideal American individual and violation of all selfish European individuals is both a character and a symbol. Cooper uses him to symbolize the myth of the hero woodman because he defines the characters by their relationships to nature. Actually, he is a matured and self-reliance character. Through this genius task, Cooper establishes the prototype and archetypal model for American character and differentiates it from European Character, that is, abrogating and undermining European literature and characters as the universal superior literature and characters or declaration of independence of America through literature, that is, decolonization.

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