



American Indigenous Literature in the Eyes of the Islamic University Students

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Abstract. This paper aims at discussing Islamic university students' response toward an American Indigenous literary work, by applying "reader response theories" in a literary studies class. I analyzed students' response to the American Indigenous literary work. Rosenblatt (1938) noted that the quality of literature reflects human life and argued that readers' response to a text depends upon their cultural background and life experience, and their contextual reality, and others. She highlights the uniqueness of individual readers, as the consequences of their histories, belief, values, and context, which shapes their understanding of the text. The text selected in this project is a short story written by Sherman Alexie entitled "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (in the collection of short stories "Ten Little Indian", 2003). The story narrates the experiences of an Indian man named Jackson who has become a homeless in a town of Seattle, and he had to take great effort to get back the regalia of his late grandmother in a shop. The selected work has American Indigenous setting, as the writer himself is an Indian Spokane and the narration in the text deals with the daily life of Indian people in American city. The students' responses are analyzed by culturally thematic analysis and there are three topics that interest students in discussing the work. They are the issues of regalia, the ideas of homelessness, and the drinking habits of the Indian people.

Keywords: American Indigenous literature · literary class · readers' response

1 Introduction

Indigenous literature is one of the literary genres important to be discussed especially among the students of English literary studies. It is one of the subjects that gives students more knowledge and understandings on multicultural and intercultural context. It also presents the culture and the literary style of the indigenous people, as the literary work reflects the social and cultural life of the people [1]. The indigenous literature discussed in this paper is the American native (Indian) literatures that have important roles in American literary landscape. Among other roles are its function as the expression of indigenous identity, which articulates the concerns on the life of the Indian people in the changing social and cultural context [2]. There are various narrations of Native American literary works from which we can figure out the ideas on the stories and knowledge of

the indigenous people. To build the understanding on the literature of Native people, this paper aims at discussing an indigenous literary work in the form of short story, entitled "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," which is included in the collection book of *Ten Little Indians* (2003), written by Sherman Alexie [3]. The story is read and discussed by the students of literary studies in Indonesian Islamic university, so that this current study aims at figuring out the readers' responses to the indigenous literary work.

Indigenous literature has some important functions for internal of the Native people and for the external readers. For the native people, the indigenous literary work articulated and expressed their identity and aspirations. More importantly, according to Topash-Caldwell (2020) the literary work also affected young Indigenous people in how they perceived themselves and built their own identity [4]. In addition, there are many important aspects that we have to pay attention in the indigenous writing. Annette van Dyke says that we can find out many vital elements that the Native writers have written in their works, such as their belief in the sacredness of language and earth. Indigenous writers also have big concern on the place and landscape, propagation of cultural values, and concern for the community welfare as opposed to the concern for the individual into their writings. In such a way, that a literary work written by a Native American writer is not so much fiction as it is "witnessing" significant moments from time to time [5].

For the external readers, beyond the indigenous people, the indigenous literary work is a form of literary outreach to a diverse and inclusive audience. Supported by ever increasing and more sophisticated information technology, the readers are wider and larger, which brings a consequence of the vast readership. Therefore, students of literary studies are able to access the literary work of American indigenous people. More importantly, Coulombe (2011) said that the literary works encourage thoughtful responses by introducing and directing readers to the issues and ideas important within them [6].

The other study that shed the light on indigenous literary works also tell the readers, that the works give us the insight about the past, and their situation today. Angela Cavender Wilson, a historian, said, "language, stories, and epistemology are connected to who we are and where we will go in the future" [7]. Under this perspective, understanding indigenous literary work is essential to figure out and respect the history, the knowledge and life of Native people.

Reader response is important in literary studies, as responding to literary work is basically an activity of connecting between the readers and the literary works [8]. Personal connection is obtained through close reading, and the readers will bring their own knowledge and values to bear on the reading experience. To build a good response, readers need to understand the message in a literary work through the structure of the works. The readers need to observe the text, by reading closely and examining the actions and events, people and places, ideas and values. In addition, readers need to pay attention on the significance of a particular object discussed in the work, the choices of a particular words, and the references to people, place and events outside of the literary work [9]. All of the elements are meant to build the personal connection between the reader and the literary work.

Writing a literary response is an activity that the students need to practice a lot. Through the activity of literary responding, the students are exposed to different ideas on literary works. They may respond in different ways, involving the skill of analysis,

with emotional and intellectual vigor about any subject presented in a literary work. The process of understanding, writing and thinking, gives the learning experience in the new ways to perceive, to speculate, to wonder and to know.

For the reasons mentioned in the discussion above, the present study aims at exploring the question of how the Islamic university students respond to the short story entitled "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" written by Alexie (2003). As the Rosenblatt's theory of reader response said, the social, cultural, and educational background of the readers affect the literary response that the students will convey.

2 Method

This study is qualitative research by focusing on the reader's responses toward Sherman Alexie's short story entitled "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (in the collection of short stories "Ten Little Indian", 2003). The responses are taken from the students of Indonesian Islamic university who are studying Literary studies (semester 6). There are 6 students' responses considered in this study, because the other students' responses are almost similar to those students. The students get informed on the American Native (indigenous) literature, and they have capability of reading and understanding the short story. The story is considered as understandable for the students, in terms of the language and vocabularies. The students are asked to read closely and write down their response on the short story. The response is a free writing, in which the researcher did not make any particular guiding questions. It aims at exploring any aspects that interest the students.

The data are collected from the students' responses and then reduced and selected. The classification of the selected data is done according to the topics. There are three topics selected from the students' response, mainly the topic of the new vocabularies, the native people (the main character) problems and challenges in his daily live, and the humor in the story. In the analysis, each of the topics are described, interpreted, and analyzed to answer the research question, that lead to the conclusion.

3 Result and Discussion

In the following discussion, I will present the data and the discussion according to the research question. The Story of "What You Pawn I will Redeem" narrates the main character, named Jackson who is a Spokane Indian living homeless in the city of Seattle. Being a homeless person did not make him inferior or downgraded. Instead, he is proud of his situation, as he builds the skills of survival as a homeless man. When Jackson and his friends walked along the street in the downtown of Seattle, he saw a regalia in a pawnshop. The regalia attracted his attention because he believed that it was his grandmother's regalia which was lost 50 years ago, and his family looked for that precious thing. The shop owner did not want to give the regalia for free, instead he gave a challenge for Jackson to get money as much as 999 Dollars in 24 h, which is impossible for Jackson. However, he agreed to the deal. During 24 h, Jackson walked roaming the downtown, and experienced many events except obtaining the money.

After reading the story, most of the students' response say that the story is interesting because they have got some new vocabularies dealing with the American Indian cultural

terms. In addition, the story is not too difficult to understand. Most of the students get the ideas on the plot, the conflict, and the setting of place of the story. The students' responses are classified into three topics: the new vocabularies, the problems encountered by the native people, and the aspects of humor in the story.

3.1 New Vocabularies Related to the American Indian Cultural Terms

The language of the short story is relatively easy to understand for the students of English literature, semester 6. The plot is not difficult to follow, and the most interesting things in the aspect of language use is the new vocabularies that the students get through reading the story. The vocabularies are related to the social and cultural setting of the story. The story tells us about an Indian man, named Jackson who is a Spokane Indian. The main character is presented with a strong Indianness identity. He is a Spokane, and his family and clan are all Indian. As the contrary, there is a term mentioned in this context, "Plain Indians." The term is mentioned by Jackson referring to someone else, an Indian man but in generic term, not with specific tribe as the identity.

The other vocabularies related to the story, is the word "pawnshop, pawnbroker" referring to the word pawn. The pawnshop means a shop selling pawned things. In the story, Jackson found out his grandmother's regalia in a pawnshop. From finding the regalia, Jackson gets determined to fight like a knight to get back the regalia in a 'fair' way. The pawnbroker, somebody as the owner of the pawnshop is represented as a good man, although at the beginning he looked like any businessman who runs a business. The pawnbroker gives a challenge to Jackson to get nine hundred dollars in 24 h, to get back the regalia. This is a big amount of money that is impossible to be found by Jackson. Some students are familiar with the kind of pawnshop which is in Indonesian called "rumah gadai" but not called as a shop. Nevertheless, the word pawnshop in English term is a new term they encountered while reading the story.

As seen in the Table 1, there is a word "powwow" referring to a particular tribal ceremony in which people who dance in this event wears a regalia, so that it is called powwow dance, and powwow regalia [10]. The powwow-dance regalia is important thing in this story, as this is the 'sacred' thing that is owned by the grandmother who had been passed away, and the regalia was lost 50 years ago. The 'finding' of regalia has become an important event in the plot, since Jackson has to give a proof that it is his grandmother regalia, and make a deal with the pawnbroker. The powwow regalia functions not only as an ethnic identity but also it functions as a sacred thing for ceremony or ritual. In students' perspective, regalia can be associated with "ethnic clothes," which is a unique identity of a particular ethnic group, but generally it is not functioned as sacred thing.

3.2 The Challenges of Indigenous Man Living in the Modern City

Since the Indian were put into reservation, most of them are encouraged to be living in the city nearby to live, get a job, and made interactions with other people from different ethnics [11]. However, without good education, politic and economic access, the Indian people are marginalized in the city. This problem is narrated in the story, sometimes in humorous ways. In this part, we will discuss how the main character encounters challenges and problems in his daily life.

Table 1. New Vocabularies in the Story

No	Shortcuts
1	Name of the Indian tribes: - Yakama - Colville - Plain Indians - The Aleuts ...he describes himself only as Plains Indian, a generic term, and not by a specific tribe.
2	Pawn – Pawnshop - Pawnbroker “‘The pawnbroker looked at me like I was a liar.”
3	The wharf “‘When I got to the wharf, I ran into three Aleut cousins who sat on a wooden bench and stared out at the bay and cried. Most of the homeless Indians in Seattle come from Alaska.”
4	The powwow - Powwow dance - Powwow-dance regalia
5	Regalia “‘But the strangest thing was the old powwow-dance regalia I saw hanging in the window.”

3.2.1 Homelessness

Homelessness is a big issue in the Seattle city. Seattle is a city in which many big multinational companies located here, and this brings the effect of the rising price of housing from time to time [12]. Only those who have good salary can afford the housing facilities. This situation resulted in more and more homeless people, those who cannot afford to rent an apartment room or any cheap housing facilities. The homeless (native_people, can be seen along the side of the road sleeping in tents, or along the street at the downtown. In this story, the homeless Jackson provides different humorous account of being homeless [13]. He is proud of being homeless as he is able to access many important facilities that many people could not afford it. He can borrow a clean and exclusive toilet in a restaurant, and he is able to get a free lunch, and he has a kind-hearted cop as his friend. Therefore, Jackson enjoyed being homeless for six years. However, the same luxurious thing of being homeless did not happen to other homeless people. He is aware that people did not respect them at all.

I've been homeless for six years. If there's such a thing as being an effective homeless man, I suppose I'm effective. Being homeless is probably the only thing I've ever been good at. I know where to get the best free food. I've made friends with restaurant and convenience-store managers who let me use their bathrooms.

For the students, the fact that Jackson was proud of being homeless is deemed as a unique identity, that open new understanding of how people survive in the homelessness situation in the city of Seattle. In Indonesian urban areas, homeless people may sleep at the market or in front of closed shops, which has no access for the sanitary facilities, not as lucky as Jackson in the story.

3.2.2 Alcoholic Addiction

The alcoholism has been interesting topic to discuss for the Muslim university readers. This is related to the Islamic religious norms that stipulate the alcoholism as ‘haram’ (forbidden). For the Native Indian people, alcoholism is presented in this story as something problematic. First, drinking alcohol is a habit, that they enjoy much. Jackson and his folks enjoy this as a way to be involved in the ‘community’ in ‘all-Indian bar.’ He said that “Indian alcoholics are either sprinters or marathon runners,” implying that they are happy and enthusiastic to do that. However, the drunken people resulted in another problem: lost money and have none to talk with. Jackson was kicked out of the bar, in the condition of severe drunkenness. The bar worker did not care that Jackson has spent all his money in the bar.

“It’s closing time. I don’t care where you go, but you’re not staying here.” “You are an ungrateful bastard. I’ve been good to you.” “You don’t leave right now, I’m going to kick your ass.” “Come on, I know how to fight.” He came for me. I don’t remember what happened after that.

Most of Muslim students said that the alcoholism is negative and they have to avoid, not to be closed (in literal meaning) with this alcohol drink, in daily life. They did not see any good thing from the alcohol beverage.

3.2.3 Different Ways of Valuing Money

Having no regular job makes Jackson tried hard to get money. Sometimes he sells newspapers, but all of the job did not give him enough money. Though only having little money, Jackson is generous in spending the money to be happy with other ‘cousin’ in a bar, buying drinking for all people in the “all-Indian bar” or buying food for other cousin of the Aleuts. He spends the money without any hesitation, although he is in the mission to get big money. His sense of solidarity makes him happier, than keeping the money for himself.

3.3 Humor in the Story

The humor in the story can be said as ironic humor. The first, is that Jackson as a Native people is aware how people look down at him and his tribe [14].

Example 1. Ironic Humor

Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage. But we have dreams and families. I'm friends with a homeless Plains Indian man whose son is the editor of a big-time newspaper back east. That's his story, but we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers, so maybe that Plains Indian hobo is a plain old everyday Indian.

Example 2.

"You wouldn't happen to have a thousand dollars, would you?"

"We've got five dollars total," I said. "That's too bad," he said and thought hard about the possibilities. "I'd sell it to you for a thousand dollars if you had it. Heck, to make it fair, I'd sell it to you for nine hundred and ninety nine dollars. I'd lose a dollar. It would be the moral thing to do in this case. To lose a dollar would be the right thing." "We've got five dollars total," I said again

In the example 1, the humor can be called ironic. Jackson describes the Indian homelessness as common issues, and people can find them anywhere in the city. The term "noble savage" means the contradictory situation of the Indian people, noble but savage. He said this ironic humor to describe how 'white people' look at them. However, the Indian people also have their way of doing resistance, by being "great story tellers, liars and mythmakers." [15] The humor can be called a dark humor, confessing the paradox of good character of story tellers, and the contrary, of liars and mythmakers. In the story, the main character, Jackson is presented to be the story teller and mythmakers. He is able to make people trust him through his story of his grandmother. He is also able to make the kind-hearted Cop, his good friend, took a pity on him, through his story. When the Cop wants to bring him to the Detox office (a place for rehabilitating the alcoholic addicted), Jackson refused, the Cop could not do anything else. He just gives him money, instead. And, Jackson could not keep promise to stop being alcoholic.

In example 2, the dialogue of the pawnbroker and Jackson, the pawnbroker said that the price of the regalia is 999 Dollars. He has discounted 1 dollar, and that is a reasonable discount, he said it is a moral thing to do, so one dollar is the price of the morality. To lose a dollar is the right thing. Readers can count that 1 dollar from 1000 dollar means 0.001. The morality, as consequence, is considered extremely cheap. This means nothing change for the price. And, this is ironic, because Jackson is surely could not afford the price.

Nevertheless, the funniest thing is, Jackson's response that he only has "We have got five Dollars total," meaning he has only five dollars total. This negotiation is asymmetrical, 999 Dollars and 5 dollars. The funniest thing is Jackson mention his five dollars with the same confidence as the pawnbroker said 999 Dollars. This ironic humor shows the positions of the asymmetrical between native people and non-native people [16]. This also shows Jackson's 'resistance' for not following the rule of the game provided by the pawnbroker.

4 Conclusion

It can be concluded that the short story of "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" shows the young Indian people who value most on the regalia. He has a valuable memory of the regalia connected to his grandmother. The importance of regalia is described since beginning until the end of the story. At the beginning, Jackson remembers the regalia, and make speculation that the loss of the regalia made his grandmother sick and dead. At the end, he shows the importance of regalia by wearing it and dance, and feeling that his grandmother is back, he himself become his grandmother.

As the regalia is the main subject in this story, the main character tried hard to obtain his grandmother regalia and made this quest as a sacred mission he has to take in 24 h. He did not value much on money, although the mission asked him to get the money. The different ways of valuing money, make Jackson successful of "not following the game." If he followed the game, he would have worked very hard to get money, and this is impossible. Instead, he spent all the money he has, for drinking and having lunch with his native folks. At the end, without the money he has to obtained, he is successful to get the regalia, because of the kindness of the pawnbroker.

For the Indonesian Islamic student readers, the three topics found out from the response to the short story. The topics are, the new vocabularies related to the native Indian identity, the challenges that the Indian people encounter while living in a city of Seattle. The problems of homelessness and alcoholism have become serious issues that students pay attention. For Jackson, homelessness has become something enjoyable, but for other people in general this is a big concern. The same issue happens with alcoholism. For the Muslim readers in Indonesian university, the homelessness and alcoholism have become important concern. This is affected by Muslim norms that consuming alcoholic beverage is forbidden. The third, is the humor that students think it is interesting as the humor is the dark humor that tells the readers the ironic situation on the challenges that the native people face in their daily life.

The powwow regalia as the most important thing in this story has become the starting point that attract readers' attention since it gives a new vocabulary for the readers. The author is successful in exploiting the regalia as the important subject that relates to the historical, social and cultural issues. Through the search for regalia, readers are able to witness the social cultural problems that the native Indian face in their daily life. For the readers of Islamic University students, those three topics discussed above raising empathy and understanding on the social cultural context of the Native American people.

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