

The Popular Culture And Native Americans

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Stereotypes of Native Americans in Popular Culture

Popular culture plays a role in forming and creating identities for people. For instance, most movies in the past portrayed black people as criminals and Native Americans or Indians as barbaric and inhuman. Many famous moviemakers have persistently attached the barbaric notion and apathetic nomadic life with Indians. Popular culture has influenced their identities with superficial notions.

Be it in the movies or in books, Indians are presented as uncivilized and cruel, with a lack of empathy toward others. Although the stereotypical representation of Native Americans has reduced immensely, there are still glimpses of it presented in popular culture. The paper will discuss the stereotypical representation of Indians as barbaric, uncivilized, and apathetic through movies such as *The Silent Enemy* and *Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. The change in the representation through *Smoke Signal* and the book *Reservation Blues* by [Sherman Alexie](#) is essential to see the differences in the representation of native Indians in Sherman Alexie's work and the earlier work by a white man.

The Battle of Elder Bush Gulch portrays Indians as ugly, uncivilized, dancing, and violent. It is one of the early silent movies directed by D.W. Griffith. The movie starts with two orphan girls who are sent to their Uncle. The girls carry dogs with them. The uncles do not allow dogs inside the house and ask the girl to keep them outside. The girl then sees the Natives dancing in uncivilized vigor. While they are happy and dancing, the chief of the native Indians arrives late for the feast and is hungry. At that moment, one of the girls feels the dog is absent and searches for it. The Indians catch the girl, but the Uncle appears and shoots him. They leave for the moment but gather the natives to fight the Uncle and other villagers. The natives want revenge for the Chief's son, who was killed due to the bullet. They turn barbaric and attack the village, killing and violating the villagers (Griffith). The battle starts between the two groups; in the end, the white people win over the Indians. The movie shows the barbarism and lack of civilization through attire, dance, and war. The movie presents the natives vulnerable to inflict violence, sexual abuse, killing, torturing, and inflicting damage on the white people. They are shown as an enemy in the movie.

Shifting Representations in Film and Media

Similarly, the *Silent Enemy* presents the Indians as hungry and ready to kill. The movie was directed by H.P. Carver in 1930. The movie also portrays the barbaric traditions of sacrifice and slaying. The nomadic and uncivilized dance is part of the movie as well. The movie begins with the authority of

presenting the truth, lamenting the arrival of the white man who has tried to destroy the culture of the Native Americans but being thankful immediately for the preservation of the Indian culture. The story begins when Baluk takes the hunters to the South for hunting but returns with no food. The search for food continues, but they do not find any, and finally, they return to the traditional rituals to please the gods with sacrifice. Although the Baluk is ready to sacrifice himself, they end up slaying Caribou and offering a feast. The feast is accompanied by the dance.

In both of these movies, the Indians are presented as ugly or evil-looking with no emotions, prone to violence, and uncivilized with barbaric traditions (Carver). The movies exaggerate certain features of these people to be monotonous and blank, wearing traditional dresses, prone to be violent and barbaric, and knowing no mercy. The movies dehumanize the people and justify the settlers and their exclusive behavior toward the Native Americans. Most of the popular culture had portrayed similar images of the Indians until recently when it changed, and people started portraying the Native Americans as humans with similar problems.

The Smoke Signal is a movie directed by Chris Eyre and was released in 1998. It is a movie by all Native Americans. It was written, directed, and produced by the Native Americans. Moreover, it moves away from the stereotypical representation of the Indians, keeping the distinguishing features of the Indian people and showing their problems. The two main characters, Victor and Thomas, live in the same neighborhood and are very different from each other. Victor is social and athletic but Thomas a bookworm. When Arnold, Victor's father, dies, the two leave their home to visit and settle the final rituals of their father. They start their journey to self-discovery and identity. Victor implies that the dominant stereotypes about Indians are to seem to mean when he says, "look mean," as if you have killed the buffalo and come back. In the end, Victor and Thomas form identities to resolve the issues with Arnold (Eyre). Besides presenting some of the stereotypical long hair and flat faces, the movie represents the Indians with human emotions and empathy towards each other and outsiders, unlike the earlier representations of the stereotypes.

Native Voices, Cultural Identity, and Contemporary Representation

Similarly, the book Reservation Blues by Sherman Alexie represents Native Americans' problems living with the whites in the present day. The book presents identity and cultural problems that Native Americans face in the form of exploitation and appropriation via the story of the band Coyote Springs. The Cavalry Records uses two girls to culturally appropriate the Coyote Springs to sell their songs to a broader audience. It shows how their talents are used to become famous and gain fame without their agency and approval through the imposition of two white girls on the band without asking them about it. It shows the complex interactions of Native Americans with white people. Indian men are attracted to the white skin of the white women, and Indian women are attracted to the Indian men. The novel also refers to the traditional values of Indians, such as dancing, feasting, and a traditional and

reserved way of speaking to strangers (Sherman). The book also refers to the pain and torture that the white men inflicted upon the Native Americans, causing their dreams to be scary and malign with fear. Hence, the novel presents that the native people were as human as anyone else but had been portrayed negatively. The **horror stories** of mistreatment do not allow the Indians to sleep soundly (Hafen).

Although the recent movies and text show a different picture of Indians, the popular culture of the past has portrayed them negatively with exaggerated stereotypes and dehumanizing ways. The text by Sherman Alexie and the other popular cultural portrayals of Native Americans differ in many ways but have some similarities. Although some people have criticized him for exaggerating the events and pain, the book fairly represented the Natives (Bird). Alexie's writing shows the problems of natives, as did the movie *The Silent Enemy*, but they contrast strikingly as the silent movie ends up criticizing and labeling the culture and tradition of the Indians as barbaric and uncivilized. However, Alexie's approach toward Indian culture and tradition is critical; it is not offensive, and it does not label them (Lyons). He criticizes but also highlights problems that they face in the contemporary world trying to assimilate into the dominant culture. Alexie's representation questions the traditions of the Native culture and does not portray them negatively. However, the earlier movies questioned Indian cultures as well as presented them negatively.

To conclude, popular culture in the past has portrayed the Native American culture with criticism and negativity, dehumanizing and ridiculing them and their culture. However, it has changed recently, and people have begun to pay attention to the problems of Indians. They have recognized the ill-treatment that they have received and tried to present it to the public via popular culture through movies and books, especially Alexie, who has tried to show the problems and human traits of the Native Americans in his book.

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