

Squatting in American Culture: A Study on James Fenimore Cooper's Novel *The Prairie*

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Abstract. The history of America cannot be separated from squatting. When European people came to the eastern coast of America in 1600s, they had lived in the settlement that did not belong to them. They did not stop living in the settlement, rather, they kept moving to the West to look for better life. The discovery of gold in California made them move to the West although they underwent difficulties along their journey. This study attempts to explore squatting in American culture in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Prairie*. This research uses Cultural Studies method, in which literary, historical and sociological approaches are combined to analyse a certain phenomenon on a text. History and sociology are used in the research because they complement the existing sources in the literature. The data are mainly taken from James Fenimore Copper's novel, namely, *The Prairie*. The novel is used in the research as starting points to describe squatting, and then the development of it can be described in American Culture. Other data are taken from film, magazines, newspapers and historical and sociological articles, as well as articles from American Studies Journal. Based on the research, squatting emerges because the squatters do not have enough money to buy or to rent the land for their settlement. Besides, the squatters usually assume that the land that belongs to Indians can be occupied or owned without having to pay it.

Keywords: Squatting, American Culture, Squatters, *The Prairie*

1. Introduction

Squatting in America began when British people came to the New World to look for new living. People with different backgrounds and aims occupied the land without considering to whom it belonged. They thought that the land they encountered belonged to no one and anyone had the right to occupy it.

Once they had occupied the land, the squatters usually arranged the land use according to their wishes. They did not consider whether the condition of the land was in accordance with their arrangement. What they thought was how they could fulfill and survive in the new settlement. The squatters did not consider how to properly manage the land for sustainability in accordance with the condition of the land, as stated by Alsayyad (1993: 34), "Squatting was the origin of many informal land arrangements."

This study attempts to explore squatting in American culture in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Prairie*. Through Ishmael Bush and his family, as the squatters in the novel, I try to reveal the squatters' life and how they can survive in the unfriendly

environment. According to Brueckner and Selod (2009:28), there are three reasons why squatting happens, namely,

“first, squatting is always associated with crowding, yielding very high population densities. Second, squatted land is usually not developed or serviced, leading to highly restricted and congested access to basic services for squatters. Third, while squatting is often thought to occur on vacant public land, much squatting also occurs on private property.”

The squatters usually have complex problems so that they become squatters. Not only are they jobless, but they are also homeless so that they ignore the law on land ownership. Moreover, population growth from time to time always causes problems in terms of settlements where the existing settlements are not sufficient to accommodate the population.

In connection with the topic above, some people have conducted some researches. In his thesis, Riyatno (2005) describes frontiersmen's lives in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The research covered three things, namely frontier's meaning, the live's character in the American frontier and the frontiersmen's nature, as well as the traits of frontier life and the attitudes of the American people. According to his research, he divides the people in the Western region into three major clusters, namely long hunters, backwoodsmen, and pioneers. But again, the topics of his research are the long hunters and the backwoodsmen.

In her thesis, then, Ceisy Nita Wuntu (1996) discusses the comparison between wilderness and civilization in by James Fenimore Cooper's novels *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*. In her research, she compares civilized white people and uncivilized Indians. According to white people, for example, scalping the head of their enemy in war or battle indicates uncivilized actions. According to the Indians, it is their culture, but for the whites, such practices are obviously barbaric and inhumane.

Meanwhile, Rumiri Rotua Aruan (2002) talks about an American pioneer family of the late XIX century in *Little House on the Prairie*. Indonesian national television played the work as a film in the 1980s. As noted in the title of that paper, the family of pioneers are pioneers living in the grassland area or prairie where the area is not as fierce as in the forest or wilderness.

The last, Juliet Shields (2009) talks about savage and Scott-ish masculinity in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*. Based on her research, she says that, “The Prairie describes the efforts of Heyward's grandson Duncan Uncas Middleton to rescue Inez de Certavallos first from the migratory Bush family, which has kidnapped her for ransom, and then from the predatory Sioux Indian” (Shields: 2009:140). It also “depicts the diminishing utility of the chivalric sentiments of Scots to the United States' westward expansion; yet it also suggests that the new class of frontiersmen to which Paul and Ellen belong have appropriated the diasporic sensibilities of Scots, particularly their ability to adapt to new and often threatening environments by adopting the traits and resources of other cultural groups” (Shields: 2009:140).

Based on the above description, the research on squatting in American culture in the novel *The Prairie* has not been done.

2. Method

The research method used in this research is that of Cultural Studies (Gray, 2003; Longhurst & Smith, 2008). The researchers took main data from James Fenimore Cooper's novel, namely, *The Prairie*. The secondary data were taken from the relevant books, film, scientific journals, or websites that support to reveal the idea of squatting in American Culture so that white people can survive in the frontier. To get the data, the researchers read the novel carefully and wrote them in the data card. We also read other relevant sources so that the data become complete. The last step was the researchers analyzed the data based on their categories, namely very relevant, relevant, and less relevant.

3. Result and Discussion

The story of squatting begins when Ishmael Bush and his family cross the prairie west of Mississippi. As settlements east of the Mississippi becomes crowded, many people move to west across the Great Prairies west of the Mississippi. The population density east of the Mississippi is getting higher along with a wave of immigrants from various European nations. The data shows that the increasing number of immigrants who come as well as of the births makes the population increase. In the end, land for habitation became increasingly limited and triggered a westward movement of people without legal housing and decent livelihoods, as stated in the followings:

Between 1790 and 1830 the population of the United States more than tripled, increasing from about 4 million to nearly 13 million. Nearly all of this growth resulted from births in the United States itself. During these years fewer than 400,000 immigrants entered the country.

(Todd and Curti, 1972:297)

In the study, too, we focus on the main character, namely, Ishmael Bush, based on his name and his role as a squatter in the context of squatting. In the novel *The Prairie*, Ishmael Bush refers to directly the squatter. It means that we examine the name Ishmael Bush himself in the context of squatting. If we look at the name of Ishmael, we know that, according to both Islamic and Christian history, Ishmael was the first son of Abraham from a slave named Hagar. From his wife, Sarah, Abraham had Isaac, who was born after Ishmael. The problem arose when Sarah knew that Ishmael mocked Isaac. For this reason, Sarah said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21: verse 10). From Sarah's statement, it is obviously clear that Ishmael will one day take illegally what is owned by Isaac. In this context, the name Ishmael in Christian belief refers to a squatter, a person who grabs something that is not his right. That is why James Fenimore Cooper states Ishmael and the squatter for the same character in the novel *The Prairie*.

The history of America cannot be separated from squatters since the European immigrants occupy the American native's land. The need of settlement and arable land for the immigrants makes American Government buy or occupy the new land (Janieski, 1998; Strobel, 2001). After Louisiana was purchased by the US Government in 1803,

Thomas Jefferson, the President, assigned Meriwether Louis and William Clark to lead officially an expedition to the West (Todd and Curti, 1972). It means that the territory has not been occupied by white people, except the Indians. Legally, if people want to settle or to look for “the mines of the virgin territory” (Cooper, 1985: 10), they should have official documents as proof of legal ownership.

When people have a strong desire to find a new life in a new place, they usually do not have a comfortable place to live and living in their place of origin. The strongest possibility is that they do not have permanent residence and they cannot afford to have one legally. Thus, they decide to leave and find a more comfortable life (Davis, 2001). In addition, the conditions during the journey to the west do not allow them to spend the night at will. Nature is still wild and the Indians who possibly attack at any time make them have to find a safe place to spend the night. Ishmael Bush, as the leader of the travelers, asks Natty, the trapper, to show the place. "Stranger, if you ar' much acquainted in this country," said the leader of the emigrants, "can you tell a traveller where he may find necessaries for the night?" (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 16).

The journey to search “for the Eldorado of the West” takes a long time (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 11). Of course they pass through an area where the Indians still controll the area, both as a place to live and as a hunting ground. The presence of immigrants in large numbers will directly reduce the area of livelihood of the Indians. When these settlers occupy their territory without any compensation to be paid, or without any prior communication, the Indians always try to expel them, even attack them.

In the novel *The Prairie*, Ismael Bush and his family include people who do not have legal ownership of the place they are occupying and the place they are going to. However, when Natty reminds Ishmael Bush of the obligations of immigrants to the rightful owners of the land, Ishmael Bush becomes offended, as shown in the following dialogue:

"He, who ventures far into the prairies, must abide by the ways of its owners."

"Owners!" echoed the squatter, "I am as rightful an owner of the land I stand on, as any governor in the States! Can you tell me, stranger, where the law or the reason, is to be found, which says that one man shall have a section, or a town, or perhaps a county to his use, and another have to beg for earth to make his grave in? This is not nature, and I deny that it is law. That is, your legal law. (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 61)

The squatters usually feel that they have the right to occupy land or forests that are still uninhabitant. In the nineteenth century, “at many of the national forests created around the turn of the century, the situation was much the same: squatting, timber stealing, and illegal hunting all proved endemic” (Jacoby, 2001: 2). Furthermore, added the commissioner, “a mere squatter, with no intention of acquiring title, is a trespasser, and has no rights that the government is bound to respect.”

Ishmael realizes that to earn a decent living they have to fight hard. Especially with the condition of those who do not have sufficient supplies to eat. Ishmael says that “this is a hard country to make a crop in, boys; and yet food must be found to fill many hungry mouths!” Cooper: *The Prairie*: 74). However, their strong desire to continue towards

California kept them moving and not making settlements for agriculture, as the squatter points "in the direction of the Pacific" (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 75).

Problems arise when the cattle brought along with the group are stolen by the Siouzes. According to Ishmael, the Siouzes can be called robbers because they take cattle that do not belong to them. However, according to Natty, the trapper, the act cannot be categorized as robbery because it does not violate the Prairie Law. It can be seen in the followings:

"Trapper, go on, for we are engaged in reasonable discourse," interrupted Ishmael; "you believe we shall see more of these robbers."

"Nay, nay, I do not call them robbers, for it is the usage of their people, and what may be called the Prairie law."

"I have come five hundred miles to find a place, where no man can ding the words of the Law, in my ears," said Ishmael, fiercely, "and I am not in a humour to stand quietly at a bar, while a red-skin sits in judgement. I tell you, trapper, if another Sioux is seen prowling around my camp, wherever it may be, he shall feel the contents of old Kentuck," slapping his rifle in a manner that could not be easily misconstrued, "though he wore the medal of Washington* himself. I call the man a robber who takes that which is not his own. (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 78)

In this case, Ishmael Bush is a selfish person who does not recognize the property rights of others. On the other hand, when someone else takes his property, he curses that person as a robber who takes his property. Nor does Ishmael Bush realizes that when he occupies Indians' territory without agreement to occupy it, he is actually robbing Indians' property. This is the inherent nature of a squatter, who doesn't want to lose and wants to go his own way. On another occasion, Ishmael Bush says that he has succeeded in driving the Indians from the plains so that they can "sleep on the day's work" (Cooper, *The Prairie*: 119).

4. Conclusion

Ishmael Bush and his family cross the Mississippi in order to search for gold to the West because the settlement east of the Mississippi is more crowded. Based on his faith, the land west of the Mississippi is still wide to occupy, without considering to the ownership of the land. According to him, he can live in the land without buying or renting even though the land or the territory still belongs to Indians as their settlement and their hunting ground. As a squatter, Ishmael Bush neglects the existing laws, both laws made by Whites and laws applied Indians. And the last, squatting happening in *The Prairie* is the vacant public land, namely the prairie.

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