



Research Paper

## Social And Cultural Defiance: Re-Building of Native American Identity in Louise Erdrich's Tracks

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**ABSTRACT:** *Louise Erdrich's Tracks explores the tyrannies of the Anishinaabeg and their present condition. Her characters' disposition shows their inner wildness either to withhold the tribal identity and resist or to establish a new identity in the foreign society. The struggle of the Chippewas continues till date as their perpetual fear of the Whites' encroachment of the native lands and their rights haunts them. Tracks recounts and retraces the history of colonial violence that has affected the lives of the Chippewas. Though they struggle for sovereignty, the Chippewas have enslaved themselves by adapting the non-Natives' culture. Erdrich portrays how the changing times and impact of westernization has altered the native's way of life. Erdrich also points out the necessity to retain the native spirit regardless of the changing times.*

**Keywords:** *Chippewa community, epidemics, land, myth, Native American identity, resistance and re-building. "If we must die, we die defending our rights" -Sitting Bull*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The conflicts between the indigenous and the dominant settlers have channeled through time and are extended to the present. Their colonial experience and its aftermath are identified in the writings of the Native American authors. According to Peter Worsley, "the colonial relationship was a relationship between societies, each of which had its own distinctive social institutions and its own internal social differences, its own culture and subcultures" (qtd. in *Resistance Literature* 5). The colonial relationship between the Native Americans and the colonizers had worsened due to their social and cultural differences, where the colonists, intending to "civilize" the natives, began to instill the western values in them. Ever since, the Native Americans have expressed their opposition against the westerners and have continued to resist the dominant ideology. They faced cultural and social struggles where they were deprived from their rights. Despite the removal and relocation, they natives were persistent in re-creating their native identity and began to react against the colonial oppressors in various ways.

The Native American writings contribute in representing and re-creating their identity. Early Native American writings serve as a record inscribing the genocide of the natives, giving insights into their slavish life. The stories revolve around from the natives' perspective of the dominant society. Rather than the political influence, their texts focus on the pre-colonial and the genocide of the natives. Native America literature subsequently focuses on the counter actions of the indigenous against the White settlers and their struggle for the political independence. It exemplify on the representation and the opposition of the natives who chose to remain connatural irrespective of their treatment by the dominant society as savages. The writers seek to address the colonial experience and the effects mainly by observing the past events and the present conditions of the natives.

Empowering the bitter political conditions designates the repercussion of the natives. The writing serves as a referring tool to critique these repercussions of the past traumatic incidents and the contemporary concerns such as loss of the cultural and the individual identity of the colonized. The Native American literature, as the literary body of the colonial experience, discourses on the efforts to retain their native integrity. Authors from various tribes account their impact of the past hostility and the current social status of their community.

Louise Erdrich of Chippewa community explores on her tribe's relegation of their land to the government, mixed heritage, dual identity and their existence as pure-bloods and mixed-bloods in her novels. Her writing is her "way of reminding her readers not only of how existentially homeless we all are but also of how unsettled we must remain until true justice is offered for the crimes from which we still profit" ("Buried alive: the native American political unconscious in Louise Erdrich's fiction" 202-203). Jennifer Sergi has pointed out that Erdrich "is interested in preserving and presenting Chippewa culture tradition to her audience" ("Storytelling: Tradition and Preservation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" 280). Her renowned novel *Tracks* portrays the Chippewas withstanding the colonial force that has brought them to a great ordeal. The novel surfaces the politicized society, where the natives, despite being uprooted from their ancestral land, have endured and survived through time to the present. Sheila Hassel Hughes opines:

The novel's early twentieth-century Indian reservation and its Chippewa inhabitants represent an ancient community threatened with eradication by the forces of white society and industry. In representing and responding to colonization, it is tempting either to shore up boundaries and reinforce oppositions (through an absolute politics of identity or place) or to dilute the threat by a romanticized absorption of one word by the other. ("Tongue-Tied: Rhetoric and Relation in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*" 88) The novel focuses on both rebellion and assimilation of the characters. Rebellion and assimilation is seen as a strategy for the continued existence of the Native Americans. Through rebelling one rejects the western conventions and adheres to their native identity and through assimilation they tend to adapt to the dominant culture, expanding the existence as the native descendants as mixed origins. *Tracks* narrates the Chippewas' struggle on and off the reservation and the characters are disconnected from the past and are left to explore their inner self. Placed between the dual cultures, some characters in the novel hold on to their heritage, whereas some reject the native identity and create a new identity in the western society. The novel explores the inter-connected lives of the Chippewa families – the Kashpaws, the Nanapush family, the Pillagers, the Puyats, the Morrisseys, and the Lazarres.

The complexity in the human relationship shows the Native American's fear of losing their lineage in the dominant society. *Tracks* provides a back-story of the characters and is set in the past century in an imaginary reservation in North Dakota, when the western colonization created a major impact on their lives, uprooting them from their family and from their land. The characters witness the dreadful period when epidemics had wiped out Native Americans to a great extent and their survival itself is considered as a triumph as Erdrich uses the word "defeated" (35) to show the victory of the Native Americans over the foreign sickness. The major characters Fleur Pillager, Nanapush and Moses Pillagers are the sole survivors of the Pillager clan and the Nanapush clan after the epidemic hit, creating the lineage of these clans into the present and to the future. Nanapush says that he has "got a chance to pass his name on, especially if the name was an important one like Nanapush" (32). He is relieved that ". . . through Fleur Pillager the name Nanapush was carried on and won't die with me, won't rot in a case of bones and leather" (34). The cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor has said that "Survivance is active of sense of presence, the continuance of the native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. . ." (survivance.org).

Louise Erdrich, through the character Nanapush, preserves the story-telling practice of the Native Americans. She "not only chronicles the story of the Chippewas' struggle to preserve their land and culture; but also gives us the story of these stories and their tellers as well. She is telling this novel in 'Indian way'" (Jennifer Sergi 279). She focuses on "communication in a variety of forms within the Anishinaabe culture to explore the relationship between communication and whose oral traditions are central to its survival" (James Flavin 2). The oral tradition helps in re-connecting the past, present and the future. It helps in passing down the native heritage, customs and traditions to the future. *Tracks* uses story-telling to recount the past events that has led the characters to the current state. The "Space, which is a part of that past, exists not merely in a physical sense but in a metaphysical sense as well, an image which links past with present, generation with generation" (James Flavin 5). The spatial representation of the characters in the novel scrutinizes the effects of the colonialism and cultural hybridization due to their continuous relocation.

Nanapush has lived for fifty years, witnessing the changes that has occurred in time which has provided him enough stories of the tribe and its people to be passed on to next generation. It is through Nanapush's stories Lulu learns about her family and community's tragic past, where in the political existence of the natives and the white settlers, the former is subjugated. It ". . . will allow Lulu to understand the importance of the culture which she seems destined to abandon for the white culture. . ." (James Flavin 2). The story of her mother, Fleur Pillager, intrigues Lulu and she is able to connect herself to her mother. Nanapush tries to seal the gap that has pulled Lulu afar from the community. Mar Gallego views Nanapush as "the representative of tradition, insofar as he reiterates once again the importance of maintain the connection to tradition as vital nurturing for the community" ("Female Identity and Storytelling in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*" 132). The storytelling practice exhibits their "active sense of presence" and the sustainability of their culture.

The stories of the culture past reveal the Chippewas resisting the dominant society and their struggle through rejection and revenge. Barbara Harlow agrees that the resistance literature, as explained by Ghassan Kanafani in his work *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestines: 1948-1966*, “proposes an important distinction between literature which has been written ‘under occupation’ . . . and ‘exile’ . . . literature” (*Resistance Literature* 2). Native American literature naturally falls under the literature of resistance as it delineates the disposition of the natives amidst the governing society. Harlow further states:

The distinction presupposes a people’s collective relationship to a common land, a common identity, or a common cause on the basis of which it becomes possible to articulate the difference between the two modes of historical and political existence between, that is, ‘occupation’ and ‘exile’. The distinction presupposes furthermore an ‘occupying power’ which has either exiled or subjugated, in this case both exiled and subjugated, a given population and has in addition significantly intervened in the literary and cultural development of the people it has disposed and whose land it has occupied. (*Resistance Literature* 2)

The novel *Tracks* exhibits this typical condition of the Native Americans under the “occupying power” that has affected their individual and cultural existence. The act of resistance begins from their aspiration to restore what one has lost. In the novel, Nanapush’s and Fleur’s family is wiped out in the consumption but they nurse back to life. Nanapush adopts Fleur as his daughter and continues to live, fighting all odds to hold onto their native identity. He learns the white man’s language, English, to use it as a strategy to understand the white man’s plot better. He saw to that his Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John does not affect his native spirit. He refuses to give his name to Father Damien when he came to take the church census as he is aware that, “Nanapush is a name that loses power everytime that it is written and stored in a government file” (32).

Nanapush believes that, “land is the only thing that lasts life to life” (33). He has witnessed how, “in past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour. Others, who were desperate to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like pattern of straws” (8).

Nanapush has “spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake” (2). Taking away the woods and the lake shows the exploitation of the native land, which eventually erases their identity. To Nanapush, the land marks them who they are and giving up their land means giving up their identity. He refuses neither to change nor abandon his identity showing his deep rootedness towards his culture and his land. As a representative of the Chippewa tribe, Nanapush intends to protect his tribe and its people. This is evident when he gives Moses Pillager a fake white man’s name to protect his identity. He also refuses to allow a white doctor to amputate Lulu Nanapush’s feet that froze when she was out seeking help during Fleur second labour.

Through storytelling, Nanapush warns Lulu of the world outside the reservation. When Fleur sends Lulu to a boarding school, he tries to bring her back home to have her connected with the land and the family. Nanapush is revived thrice during the famine, thus showing his persistence. The novel clearly states that, “starvation makes fools of anyone” (8), thus leaving them no choice but to sell their land. The Pillagers, Kashpaws and the Nanapush’s family faces famine and is saved by government rations. When these families were about to lose their land allotments due to nonpayment of the land fees, the clans join together to save their land. But, by then Nanapush loses his land to the Lazarres and the Kashpaws, who were supposed to pay for all the three land, pays only for their land, thus Fleur loses her land. Later Nanapush takes the role of the tribal leader for the enhancement of his community. Apart from Nanapush, Erdrich has sketched Fleur Pillager as the major representative of the Chippewa community. Fleur’s character is explained by the two narrators Nanapush and Pauline Puyat. Though Fleur, Erdrich brings out the tribe’s ancient legends and beliefs into the contemporary world, allowing the native history and myths to retain its significance. Fleur was only 17 years old when Nanapush first found her in a cabin near Matchimanito Lake when her family became the victims of the consumption. The Pillagers were considered to be the powerful medicine people “who knew the secret ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them” (2). The Pillager land near the Matchimanito lake lurked with the Pillager spirits and “out the deepest water where the lake monster, Mishipeshu, hid himself and waited” (8).

Mishipeshu or Mishibijiw is one of the most important mythological water creatures of the Ojibwe culture. This underwater panther is known to be a protective creature that guards the lake. Since Fleur was from around the lake, people believed that she was controlling the monster and “there were some who declared they were glad Fleur had come back because . . .she kept the lake thing controlled” (35). This fear has stopped the white, profit-making men from entering the land. Many instances have proved that Fleur is connected to the lake monster. During the first drown, Fleur was saved by two men who not long afterward “disappeared” (10). George Many Women, who saved her during the second drown at the age of 15, “grew afraid, wouldn’t leave his house and would not be forced to go near water or guide the mappers back into the bush” (11). He died slipping in the bath tub and “breathed water” (11). Ever since “men stayed clear of Fleur Pillager” and people believed that, “Misshepesu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself” (11).

Through *Tracks*, the non-Native readers are let known of the Anishinaabe myth, thus spreading their culture's belief widely. Pauline gives a detailed description of Misshepesu's deceptive appearance that would lure people to his trap. She says, "He casts a shell necklace at your feet, weeps gleaming chips that harden into mica on your breasts. He holds you under. Then he takes the body of a lion, fat brown worm, or a familiar man. He is made of gold. He's made of beach moss. He's a thing of dry foam, a thing of death by drowning, the death a Chippewa cannot survive. Unless you are Fleur Pillager" (11).

Fleur is given the strongest characteristic that has a great impact not only on the fellow character but also on the readers as well. She is feared by everyone in the reservation. Pauline confirms that they "were dealing with something much more serious" (12) after the incident, when "she almost destroyed that town" (12). In the year 1913, Fleur left for Argus seeking job and ended up working in Pete Kozka's butcher shop along with Pauline, Russell, Lily Veddar, Tor Grunewald and Dutch James. Fleur's constant winning in the card games caused jealousy to a point where the three men attacked Fleur in the smokehouse. Fleur, from then, becomes defiant and uncontrollable. She takes immediate revenge on the three men. When Fleur returns home looking ragged, a tornado strikes Argus, killing only the three men who had sheltered themselves in the locker of the butcher shop. Pauline had always noticed the monstrous side of Fleur which others failed to notice as "they were blinded, they were stupid, they only saw her in the flesh" (18).

Fleur rages when lumberjacks move into her land to chop down the oak trees that she makes the trees to break down and fall on them and Nanapush feels that Fleur's revenge has no bounds. Since Native Americans are basically spiritual people and Fleur stands as a great exemplar, she is given the bear identity, a symbol that indicates power and authority. Fleur is not only able to control the lake monster but also the other animals. During Fleur's second labour, "the Manitous all through the woods spoke through Fleur, loose arguing. I recognized them. Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's high shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, Bear's low rasp" (59).

Fleur's rebellious nature shows her way of resisting the western ideologies and her hatred towards the settlers. She wants to restore and protect the Indian identity and heritage. Standing in contrast to Fleur is Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood. "While Fleur claim her traditional culture and uses it to fight those oppressing her, Pauline aligns with anything but traditional culture" (Mariana Coles 52). Erdrich characterizes Fleur's actions "with a sense of autonomy, while Pauline's are subject to her depraved admiration for Fleur" (Mariana Coles 50).

When the natives begin losing their significance amongst the white culture, Pauline decides to adopt the White man's identity. She is warned by her father that she will "fade out" (14) amidst the new civilization. He informs her saying, "You won't be an Indian once you return" (14). Pauline, born as mixed-blood, says, "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian" (14). This emphasizes on the fact that the Native Americans, who choose to assimilate and adapt the White heritage, like Pauline, lose their native identity.

Pauline completely rejects her native identity and she even quits speaking her native language. Her choice of adopting the White man's culture leads to the destruction of her identity in both worlds. In the Whites town, Pauline is considered as "invisible" (15) in the eyes of the westerns. Her failure to "construct her identity in a constructive way based on the climate of change surrounding her community leave her forever struggling with who is in reference to the situation" (Mariana Coles 52).

Fleur, on the other hand, epitomizes her Indian identity. She "represents much more than a rebellious woman, she stands for the whole of the Chippewa and Native culture" (Mar Gallego 155). Nanapush calls her as "the funnel of our history" (178) as she guides the other natives from converting to the Western ways. She also personifies a typical Chippewa woman and tries to "protect the tribal land and save it from the rapid advance of white civilisation, but metaphorically she is protecting the traditional way of life, especially the endurance of myths and rituals" (Mar Gallego 135).

The Native Americans faces the social challenges and are still fighting for their position in the society. The rapid transition in time has evolved the tribe, where the natives began to consider adopting as the only mean to survival. Erdrich does not implore on rejecting the native ways, but encourages being resilient and adapt the ways of the majority, not losing their innate spirit, for the co-existence and for the continuation of the tribe.

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