

A Critical study on Socio-cultural Conflicts in the Native American fiction *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich's

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Article Received: 13/11/2022,

Article Accepted: 25/12/2022,

Published Online: 29/12/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.12.16

Abstract

Native American literature is comes the under the umbrella term of “American literature” which sprouted during the period of Native American Renaissance. It commences with the oral tradition of the amble of Indigenous cultures of American and it reaches the evolutionary transformation in the aspect of writing. The writing of the Native American writers deals with their rich cultural heritage, ethnicity, identity, transracial issue, etc. It helps them to voice out their victimization and sufferings by the non-natives, especially when non-natives impose their values and principles on them to abide either directly or indirectly. This is paper deals with the cutting edge issue on socio-cultural issues projected in the novel *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich. Louise Erdrich is a reputed Native American author, often acclaimed as a most significant writer of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance. She authored fourteen novels, including the National Book Critics Circle Award - winning *Love Medicine* and awarded the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction 2015 for *The Round House*. Her writings focus on the history and the culture of Native Americans, often. The novel *Tracks* is one such, where the writers underscores the socio-cultural conflicts, quest for identity and dilemma of assimilation to the dominant culture.

Keywords: Socio-cultural, fiction, Critical study, conflicts, victimization, and sufferings

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their victimization and sufferings by the non-natives, especially when non-natives impose their values and principles on them to abide either directly or indirectly. This is paper deals with such socio-cultural issues projected in the novel *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich.

Louise Erdrich is a reputed Native American author, often acclaimed as a most significant writer of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance. She grew up in North Dakota and is a member of Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. She is the author of fourteen novels, including the National Book Critics Circle Award - winning *Love Medicine* and awarded the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction 2015 for *The Round House*. In addition to the novels, she has written volumes of Poetry, Children's books and a memoir of *The Blue Jay's Dance*. She lives in Minnesota and owns a small independent book store, Birchbark Books. Her writings focus on the history and the culture of Native Americans, often. The novel *Tracks* is one such, where Erdrich underscores the socio-cultural conflicts, quest for identity and dilemma of assimilation to the dominant culture.

Tracks comprise the lives of Ojibwe people in the twelve-year period from the winter of 1912 to the spring of 1924, mostly on the reservation but partly in fictional Argus, North Dakota. Each chapter is identified by year, by season, and the Ojibwe name of each season, or sun - *qeezis* - is printed first in the characters' native tongue and then in English translation. The dates serve as markers of the plot's linear progression, and the naming of the seasons reminds readers of the cyclical nature of traditional Ojibwa time.

Erdrich portrays the clash between the traditional Ojibwe versus the growing Euro-American culture in their land by means of two narrators old Nanapush and Pauline Pauyat in alternative chapters. Erdrich employs Old Nanapush to play the role of the Native mother who narrates the stories of the past to her children historical perspective that will enable the young Lulu to understand the reason behind her mother's (Fleur Pillagers) abandonment of her. Lulu is sent to government school for the same, thus she becomes accustomed to the White culture. Even the education system is framed by the Government or Christian Missionaries which eventually distort the native culture and value. When she comes back many years later, Nanapush hardly would recognize her.

“Your braids were cut, your hair in a thick ragged bowl, and your dress was shabby and smoldering orange, a shameful color like a half-doused flame, visible for miles...The dress was tight, too small, straining across your shoulders...” (*Tracks*, p. 22)

He would like to make her familiar with the rich cultural heritage and to strengthen the sense of identity and belongingness to young Lulu.

Tracks underscores that the people of aborigine lost their own land by the treaty of the government. It is inevitable to know about historical significance behind the novel; which provides the better understanding of the socio-cultural issue prevails in it. The novel set during the historical period when the Dawes Act (General Allotment Act) of 1887. The objectives of the Dawes Act are to lift the Native Americans out of poverty and to stimulate assimilation of them into that so called mainstream American society. It allowed tracts of arable land that had been communal reservation property to be allotted to individual tribal members.

The actual intention behind the Act is to provide detailed provisions to reduce the Indian (native) lands in Ojibwe community and they planned to sell the unallotted lands to whites (immigrants). It also assent the Native owners of allotted land needed to pay no

property taxes during an initial twenty-five-year trust period (period of grace). Though the novel not directly cites the Dawes Allotment Act, however, the opening scene of the novel *Tracks*, set in winter 1912, marks the end of that period of grace which graphically echoed the consequences in the plot.

Tracks is essentially a story about land, one of the entity of social and cultural lives of the people connected to it. Nanpush reminds the young Lulu: “Land is the only thing that last life to life. Money burns tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier.” (*Tracks*, p. 14) For Native people, land is the only source of living -food and shelter. Equally the land represents a spiritual legacy and they have a strong bond between them and land. Indian people believe that they are born from the womb of the Mother Earth. The native society underwent a lot of change due to the bill passed, which caused the huge amount of deficiency and starvation that weakened the indigenous communities and made people of these communities more vulnerable to sickness. The incredible number of deaths disturbed the tribal social relations forever and led to the sale of unclaimed allotments to whites, and those whites became the owners of land within reservation boundaries.

Community life of the native Ojibwe people is also disrupted due to the bill, especially when characters like the Morrisseys take advantage of the act and profit “from acquiring allotments that many Old Chippewa” (63) are not able to keep. Thus members of the tribe are divided one against another, and even families and friends suffer divided loyalties. When the Kashpaws learn that the money they, Fleur and Nanapush have worked together to rise is not sufficient to cover all their taxes, Margaret and Nector use the entire sum to pay the fees on their own land by betraying Fleur Pillager, their -in laws. In the end, the loss of her land and the life it represents cause Fleur Pillager to give up her beloved daughter. Thus, the advent of the Euro-American culture imposed Dawes Act, which eventually make the indigenous people socially distracted and also make them cunning/selfish in nature which is new to the native people.

In the sub-plot, Erdrich projects a mixed blood successor Pauline Puyat, who is determined to not to go hand in hand with her own community. She is an epitome of the disintegration inside the native Indian person; an orphan and a mixed blood herself whose family lost their land and tribal connection long ago. Pauline belongs to that clan “for which the name was lost” (*Tracks*, p. 14). So, her family have lost their places in the native circle and turned into outcast within the community. Nanapush emphasizes this fact about Pauline:

“She was, to my mind, unknown mixture of ingredients, like pale bannock that sagged or hardened. We never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around. So, we tried to ignore her...Because she was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales...” (*Tracks*, p. 38-39)

Pauline attaches herself to the Whites in an attempt to gain self-respect and identity. However, initially she does not deserve a position in the Convent, where as she assigned to do menial labour. When she learns the birth of Marie, her own daughter by Napolen, she is not to ready to accept the baby. Even she attempts to abort the baby that she already betrothed Christian and devoted to God. Pathetically, she could not go against the nature and gives birth the baby girl name her after the Virgin, Marie. Pauline to achieve her goal of being ‘White’, she refuses to admit that she is an Indian woman or even a

mixed blood. She denounces her own Indian heritage and looks at her own people down using the pronoun ‘them’.

She goes to the extent of begins her new life by erasing the old: She tells of a vision in which the Lord reveals that she was never a Puyat but is indeed “wholly white, a bride of Christ” an orphan whose parents both died in a state of grace. In further revelations she learns that she must forget Marie completely and dedicate herself to God. In contrast to Pauline Puyt, Fleur Pillager single handedly save her land from and baby until being betrayed by the own native - in - law. At last Pauline enters into the same convent where she had once aspired to learn lace-making from the nuns. Women in the native tradition to work with beads or quills but she clearly expresses her cultural loyalty in her desire to make lace. Thus, Pauline appropriates her power from the paternalistic traditions of the dominant White society and its religion- Christianity, Fleur Pillager is depicted as possessing the “raw power” (7) emblematic of her culture’s traditional animism.

Erdrich’s significant female characters both Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat failed to succeed in their attempt; the former tried hard to product her land and children and the latter to empower her social status by adapting to white culture, by turned into Sister Leopold. Both become the victim of socio-cultural conflicts between native and Euro-American. However, Old Nanapush perfectly balanced between his native Ojibwe tradition and the dominant white culture. Nanapush refuses to sell his allotment to the lumber company but then uses the benefit of Jesuit education to retain and regain his craft and language. Nanapush withstand the harsh winter, epidemics, government papers by being flexible to remain rooted in the tradition unlike Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat (Sister Leopold). As the title of the novel *Tracks* allude to the need of communities to survive and continue to leave track, Nanapush guides young Lulu to know their traditional track and to follow it.

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