

## **Ancestral Mythic and Artistic Visions of Modern-Day Native Mixed Heritage Americans: A Reading of Louise Erdrich's Selected Novels**

*Rabia Aamir & Zainab Younus*

### **Abstract**

*For Native Americans, the image of the circle is considered sacred. The most important significance of this symbol in communal life is the belief that everything in the physical, natural, and spiritual world is interconnected. This concept of the sacred hoop not only influences people who live with its consciousness but, in return, enables them to influence others with its understanding. Native American tribal stories, their oral literature, and myths have a strong leaning towards showing the importance of the sacred hoop and their tribal beliefs and customs. This paper attempts to address the influence these traditions of myth and stories has had on the works of Louise Erdrich by examining two of her novels, commonly known as the North Dakota Series – Tracks (1988) and The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2002). Using textual analysis as a research method, this paper analyzes the narrative techniques, themes, and different characters of the two novels. The paper examines how oral traditions are integrated within the written texts of Erdrich and how she develops a three-dimensional approach for her story telling. Making effective use of character portrayal techniques Erdrich gives comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of life on the reservation for a contemporary Native American. Benefiting both the native and non-native readers, the paper establishes the importance of studying the richness of Native American literature in the contemporary world.*

**Keywords:** Native American Novel, North Dakota Series, sacred hoop, Oral Tradition, Ojibwe

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*We are born with a purpose in life and we have to fulfil that purpose (Boyd, Rolling Thunder 1974, 262).*

*I also realized that there was one main principle, one paramount rule, basic to the continuing survival of human kind—basic even, perhaps, to the continuation of a living planet. Do not be competitive. Do not compete for survival. Compete, combat, and die. Cooperate, cultivate, and live (Boyd, Mad Bear 1994, 51).*

### **Introduction: Background to the Study**

The European occupation of what is now called America had an impact not only on the social order but also on the history and development of Native American Tribes across the continent. This has resulted in a literature that is closely linked to their cultural and historical past – more in terms of events and their impact, rather than in terms of language or genre developments. Historical, fictional, and non-fictional literary writings of the twentieth and the contemporary century Native American Indians, a people, who have been put under erasure, for almost, the last five centuries, depict many of their core issues and the world they live in. This critical mass of literature covers almost all the Anishinaabe or Anishinaabeg<sup>1</sup> tribes of Native American descent, who were dislocated from their lands, and come from all across America and parts of Canada.<sup>2</sup>

A renaissance seems to be taking place since the 1960s in terms of written production by writers from Native American background. Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist in her book *Native American Literatures: An Introduction* believes that the Native Americans need to remove the influence of colonial authority when it comes to developing a sense of their own literary values and aesthetics. She considers this a matter of necessity, because the world needs to understand the views of native tribes as they deserve individual recognition. This would lead

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to a definition of native experience that is generated by the people themselves, rather than by non-native voices, i.e. their colonialists (2004, p. 291). Helen Hoy in *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada* also warns against the easily fallen into trap of thinking that a non-native scholar can fully identify with the experiences of “aboriginal literature.” She says the “too-easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to the presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards” (Hoy, 2001, p. 9) can create an incomplete understanding regarding the issues of contemporary Native Americans.

It would be fallacious to assume that the works produced by these writers can be judged according to the normative criteria of critical analysis. Critics like Lundquist and Hoy are of the opinion that without contextualizing the Native American life, any cursory criticism on their literature would only be of superficial nature and would neither do justice to their literary production nor literary criticism. It would also be incorrect to judge the works of all Native American writers by any concept of Pan-Indianism or to expect that there would be a Universal Indian Tale. To do so is to lose sight of the issues unique to a tribe’s own particular experience. Though there are a lot of similar themes and patterns in their stories as well as storytelling techniques, yet every writer has a distinctive way to narrate their unique experiences. The multitude of languages, traditions, and tribes that comprised the Native Americans and the lack of a common literary heritage means that we cannot establish a barometer for literary development over time, the way it has been done for the English or American traditions for example.

### **Louise Erdrich: Artistic Visions of a Mixed Heritage Indian Through Storytelling**

Delimiting this study to the selected works of Louise Erdrich,<sup>3</sup> a modern day Native Mixed Heritage American, this paper is an exploration of the ways in which she perceives and interweaves the Native American ancestral, mythical, and artistic visions in her novels.

Erdrich creates an interrelated and yet discreet units of tales in her novels. Using storytelling as a powerful medium to convey a saga of events to the characters of her novels, she weaves these stories around multiple issues that the Anishnaabeg tribes are facing. She develops the characters of one novel in a different light in the next novel, and in this way her novels have interconnected themes and yet may be read as separate narratives. However, it is equally important to place these themes and motifs within the cultural context to which they belong. As mentioned, Erdrich's works are classified as North Dakota series. Within the individual books, Erdrich manages to represent not only the traditional trickster figure (Nanapush), but also life on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa or Ojibwa Reservation,<sup>4</sup> through the daily activities of her characters like Margret Kashpaw, Fleur Pillager, and Father Damien. At the same time, we also learn of the disparity between the lifestyle on the reservation contrasted with the very urbanized view of Native Americans that comes to us through the stories of writers like Sherman Alexie, for instance.

The concept of Sacred Hoop, the circle that connects all life together on Mother Earth, occupies an important position in many Native American writings. They seem to draw their strength from this concept of life.<sup>5</sup> However, different writers have different ways of using this or other concepts common to Native American heritage in unique ways. In various interviews, Louise Erdrich has mentioned the importance of

different events of her life in her writings. On various occasions she talks about the influence her childhood stories had on her literary productions. Growing up in a family that hosted multiple storytellers, Erdrich, from a noticeably young age, gets familiar with the nuances and possibilities that a storyteller's voice is capable of invoking. She refers to this as the "rise, break and fall" in the rhythms of a story's narrative. She strives to recreate the same atmosphere within her own works making her readers "hear [a] story told" (Schumacher, 1991, p.175) rather than just reading a narrative.

This is visible in both the novels selected for this study, *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2002) (hereafter referred to as *The Last Report*). Both these novels are written in first person narrative and offer multiple perspectives of the same situations. In *Tracks*, the novel has two narrators, Nanapush who is a survivor of the consumption epidemic in 1912; and Pauline Payutt who, as a mixed blood Native American, is a typical example of subject of a colony. She is ashamed of her roots, aspires to be as white as possible, and would do anything to become white. *The Last Report* on the other hand features the point of view of Father Damien Modeste, a catholic priest in residence at the Little No Horse reservation. In reality, Father Damien is a woman, Agnes Dewitt, who has disguised herself as Father Damien and adopted the persona of a religious representative. This impersonation of Agnes Dewitt as Father Damien is a device reminiscent of the Trickster figures that feature prominently in Native American fiction. Thus, characters like Nanapush and Damien are metaphors for representing the concept of a trickster figure.

Erdrich's plotlines consist of multiple, interconnected stories. What is important to note here is that not only the plotlines utilize a non-linear progression of events within the novel, but they also overlap across novels. For instance, in the case of *Tracks*, the entire time-period it represents makes up the

background of events for the novel *Last Report* which was published in 2002. This serves to create an atmosphere of teaching lessons within the novels – something that was ultimately the aim of storytelling in Native American life [See (Allen, 1992) (Teuton, 2018)].

There is a blend of imaginary and real landscapes in Erdrich's novels which lend a mythical quality to her narratives. Some significant characters are the characters of Fleur Pillager and Pauline Payutt. The character of Pauline Payutt continues in a different vein, in *The Last Report* (2002) with the additional character of Agnes Dewitt. In *Tracks* (1988) Erdrich depicts the two narrators, Nanapush and Pauline Payutt, having opposite viewpoints, and as such, they have different ways of looking at the world. But for another character, Fleur and her superhuman capabilities, they share a somewhat similar but contextually different opinions. For instance, in *Tracks* (1988), Pauline Payutt perceives the character of Fleur as possessed by the water monster, for she says, "Misshepesu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself, ...maddened for the touch of young, girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur, ...[who] sprouts horns, fangs, claws, fins" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 11). While another character, Nanapush, the other narrator of this polyphonic novel, believes that "Fleur had enticed the men to her and then killed them for her amusement? Wasn't a rumor like this enough to warn off any man?" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 55). Therefore the mysterious nature of these characters is established in the beginning of Erdrich narratives.

In chapter five of the same novel, in the episode of a fight between Nanapush's wife, Margaret Kashpaw and the Morrisseys (another tribe) which resulted in Margaret Kashpaw's shaven head, it is seen that Fleur first shaves off her hair in commiseration with her mother-in-law, Margaret, and then, as per Nanapush's narration, "she [goes] out, hunting,

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d[oes]n't even bother to wait for night to cover her tracks" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 117). Nanapush is seen to declare for Fleur at one place that "Fleur might have killed them all with the bad medicine she put together" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 119). It seems that she has superhuman characteristics, when she causes Lazarre's death (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 125). Later, in the last part of the novel, when Nanapush narrates about the strong-willed character of Fleur, who, at any cost, could not give away the ancestral land of Pillagers (her tribe) to the white invaders, she "sawed through [all the trees of her land] at the base" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 223). To saw through the base of the trees is quite an impossible feat for even a seasoned professional let alone a Native American woman of Fleur's background and credentials with no instruments at her disposal. These episodes relating to Fleur lend a mythical quality to her character as compared to her being real.

In her book, *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*, Suzanne Evertsen Lundquist asserts that "one cannot understand the Native American Literatures without a clear understanding of mythology" (2004, p. 2). Therefore, the characters portrayed by Erdrich in her novels, to whom she renders a mythological quality, cannot be understood without taking into account the mythical or artistic visions of not only her own ancestors but the Native American Indians at large. In the fourth chapter of the same book Lundquist quotes Helen Jakoski who argues that Erdrich aims at a complex rendering of the intricate and far reaching minglings and conflicts and interlocking fates among people of differing races and culture groups, all of whom feel a deep sense of their ties to the land and to their history upon it. (2004, p. 101)

Therefore, the fact that in the chapter of "Naked woman playing Chopin," the character of sister Cecilia of *Tracks* (1988) becomes Agnes Dewitt in *The Last Report* (2002) has a mythical quality associated to it.

As, like a mythical figure, Agnes Dewitt is shown to appear at the doorstep of Berndt Vogel, a German farmer, who later becomes her common law husband. Agnes Dewitt's voracious appetite to play piano compels Vogel to bring her a piano and she believes that the spirit of the musician, Chopin, enters her when she plays his symphonies on the piano. This whole episode of Agnes Dewitt's living with Berndt Vogel; playing the piano and seeing her lover die at the hands of a bank robber; getting a bullet wound herself in the hip and surviving it, renders her an aphroditic quality of a mythical figure.

The mythological quality of this character becomes evident, when, Erdrich instead of revealing the reality of Father Damien Modeste lets the readers pull along and reveals in the subsequent chapters how Agnes Dewitt survives the flood and impersonates actual father Damien's personality when she finds the latter's corpse "snagged in a tree, gaping down at her with a wide-eyed and upside-down quizzicality" (Erdrich, *The Last Report*, 2002, p. 44). In fact, in *The Last Report* (2002), Erdrich clearly narrates that Agnes Dewitt takes advantage of the actual father Damien, reincarnates and impersonates herself as Father Damien after the great flood in which he and many others had perished.

Besides the mythological and artistic visionary aspect of this fictional narrative it also brings forth the quality of Erdrich's writing style. We are never told whether the character of Father Damien that she impersonates, is Native American or white. There are references in the narrative that he may or may not be white and is deputed to go and help Christianize the native people. It gives us a fair idea of Erdrich making use of "conflicts and interlocking fates among people of differing races and culture groups" as mentioned by Lundquist cited above. There are several references about character of Father Damien for him being white. For instance, Father Damien's insistence of bringing Nanapush to come to the concept of



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monogamy as against Nanapush's tendency of polygamy in both the novels is evidence enough of him being white. Then a reference like "[t]he man was green-white, and in his death..." (Erdrich, *The Last Report*, 2002, p. 44) further signifies that he is white.

Erdrich, therefore, has not only talked about the Indian or Ojibwa nation but also the white people as colonizers who came into close contact with the Indian characters of the reservations. Resultantly, Erdrich reminds us through the characters of Pauline Payutt how she idolizes the whiteness of the colonizers. Her novels can be taken as a written record of the fictional depiction of the traditional Indian culture represented in the character of Nanapush, Lulu, his foster child, Fleur Pillager, the daughter-in-law of Nanapush's wife, the Morrisseys and the like. In addition to the native people, the depiction of the white people coming to claim the land of the Pillagers at the end of her novel makes her novels as fictional record of the colonized voices.

There is another feature of Native Indian writings that stands out from the usual literature that we come across. The way gender functions and is constructed in texts by Native American indigene communities is different from how it is done in mainstream Euro-American culture. Native American communities for example have a tradition of strong female characters. Erdrich's novel *The Last Report* serves the dual purpose of drawing socially important boundary lines and show why and how they sometimes need to be transgressed. The intense questioning of culturally-constructed gender roles is done through her main character, Agnes DeWitt. Agnes disguises herself as Father Damien Modeste in order to pursue the religious work among the Ojibwa that he was sent to do but could not, as he gets drowned in a flood before he reaches the village. During the course of Agnes/Damien's life as a male priest at the Ojibwa settlement of Little No Horse, Erdrich explores the nature of identity as a construct. Agnes, as

Damien, lives “the great lie that was her life — the true lie, she considered it, the most sincere lie a person could ever tell” (p. 61). When Father Gregory Wekkle asks her to give up her disguise and marry him, she answers back: “I cannot leave who I am” (p. 206), convinced that she is as much a male priest as a woman. Ironically, the woman living as a man is slow to realize that her disguise never fools Father Damien’s Indian flock, who are part of a culture in which gender has no or little bearing in a person’s ability to perform their life’s work. As Nanapush explains, the Ojibwa knows about “woman-acting” men and “man-acting” women but see nothing special about it (*The Last Report*, 2002, p. 232).

The funny episode where Nanapush takes Father Damien to his brother’s house-hold so that Damien could preach monogamy and convince his brother to give up one of his wives because Nanapush has an eye for that particular wife of his brother’s has many facets of understanding for the reader. *A Reader’s Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* (1999), written before the novel *The Last Report* (2002), gives a thorough analysis with relation to *Tracks* (1988);

*Tracks* is a transformational text which cavorts in the margins and flirts with danger because it plays with different parts of traditional myths, pulls stories this way and that and threatens to alter the shape of the oral tradition by bringing it into a new, written pattern....This book grows out of our own conviction that beneath the seeming chaos of story and character in Erdrich’s novels lies a series of interlocking patterns, a carefully crafted web of more-than-Faulknerian complexity—as mazelike as life itself, yet ordered by Erdrich’s genius. Our attempt to trace patterns through this complexity seems warranted by certain images within the novels themselves, images that invite the

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reader to look for connections and order within apparent chaos. (Beidler, 1999, pp. 3, 5)

By depicting the mazelike patterns of characters and narratives Erdrich has therefore remained true to her Native ancestors' mythic and artistic visions while she also discusses cultural issues facing modern day Native Americans and mixed heritage Americans.

The discussion of cultural issues of modern-day Native Americans and mixed heritage Americans is more pronounced in her later of the two novels, *The Last Report* (2002). This novel spans a time period from 1912 till 1996 and therefore the issues depicted are very much connected to modern day twentieth century. The character of Father Damien who may be regarded as the protagonist of this novel is actually a character whose journey starts from being Sister Cecilia, belonging to the ecclesiastical order. She denounces her holy stature and takes on the persona of Agnes Dewitt and lands with Berndt Vogel, a person shown of a German origin. The depiction of this character's German origin points out two facts; namely, that Erdrich is implicitly referring to the cultural issues that may or may not arise due to the union and subsequent progeny of such a mixed American people. Secondly it may refer to an autobiographic element to her own self, as, Erdrich herself is of mixed parentage of Native American and German descent. For instance, at a number of places Erdrich declares that "[m]y father, rightly, picked out a paragraph in *The Plague of Doves* as a somewhat autobiographical piece of the book" (Halliday, 2015). Later in the same interview she says that

At Dartmouth, I was awkward and suspicious. I was in the first year of the Native American program. I felt comfortable with Chippewas and ᵀpeople from the Turtle Mountains, and I felt comfortable with Dakotas ᵀbecause Wahpeton is part of the Dakota reservation and I knew many Dakota people. (Halliday, 2015)

Then she further muses over the fact of her parents' influence on her writing when she says: "My dad's great on bank robberies. He was telling me a story about a woman taken hostage during a holdup. She was being used as a hostage shield, and a deputy shot her in the hip. She became the means of inspiration as a chapter in her book "Naked Woman Playing Chopin" (Halliday, 2015).

She then points out another significant episode of her life, though not directly linked to the issues of mixed Americans, but Erdrich agrees to this autobiographical event being reflected in her works. When asked by the interviewer, whether Erdrich herself was ever put in the "naughty box" like the protagonist, Dot Adare, of her work, *The Beet Queen*, Erdrich calls it a "primal wound" and says:

I was a model child. It was the teacher's mistake I am sure. The box was drawn on the blackboard and the names of misbehaving children were written in it. As I adored my teacher, Miss Smith, I was destroyed to see my name appear. This was just the first of the many humiliations of my youth that I've tried to revenge through my writing. I have never fully exorcised shames that struck me to the heart as a child except through written violence, shadowy caricature, and dark jokes. (Halliday, 2015)

Abuses like these, from a member representing the colonizers, that Erdrich is able to figure out later, leave a deep imprint on her mind as an author. These injuries become affronts when considered at a collective level as is apparent from the two novels of Erdrich, *Tracks* (1988) and *The Last Report* (2002).

There are several cultural issues which Erdrich starts discussing from *Love Medicine* (1984) and *Tracks* (1988) which pertain to a time prior to the modern-day cultural issues. *Tracks* (1988)

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starts from 1912 and ends in 1924 and covers a time period of twelve years whereas the timeline of *The Last Report* (2002) stretches for almost the entire twentieth century starting in 1912 and ending in 1996. In *Tracks* (1988) Erdrich explains, at quite considerable length, the miseries that Anishnaabe people had to face as explained in the words of the first narrator, Nanapush, when he is summing up the entire predicament of his people in these words:

Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past some had sold their allotment land for one hundred pound weight 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 a pattern of straws. (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 8)

This is a reference to the character of Pauline Payutt. Metaphorically speaking the character of Pauline Payutt can be seen of the category who had bartered their dignity and their identity by not only accepting the holy orders of their new adopted religion, in this case, Christianity, but also betraying the trust of their own people by spreading lies about the supernatural faculties of their acquaintance and one whom she is envious of, Fleur Pillager. Pauline Payutt's character is so because at one place while she is speaking as one of the alternative narrators of *Tracks* (1988) she declares, "I was not one speck Indian but wholly white" (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1988, p. 137). Both Nanapush and Fleur regard themselves as pure blood but they both call Pauline with her family name, Payutt signifying that she is socially from an inferior clan.

Earlier in *Tracks* (1988), Nanapush narrates that "Eli had brought Pauline to help [in house-hold chores], but she was useless—good at easing souls into death but bad at breathing them to life, afraid of life in fact, afraid of birth, and afraid of Fleur Pillager" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 57). So, Pauline

herself has those superhuman abilities which she accuses Fleur of. She remarks at one instance when she covets Fleur's husband Eli and foul plays with him by using the poor girl Sophie as a bait and saying, "I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1984, p. 83).

Fleur, on the other hand represents the other kind of Anishnaabe of the above quote who is strong and tenacious; a person who is hired in Argus (a neighboring town) at a butcher's shop for this very quality, and who goes to every possible length to uphold and sustain the ways of her people. For instance, when their land is being taken away she refuses to give into the white man and drowns herself for the "third time" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 212) despite all the coaxing of her husband, Eli. The reader is told that she is married to this husband, Eli, by virtue of a marriage in their old ways and not duly approved by Father Damien's Christian ways. Since Eli had earlier coaxed her to accept the new ways, he tries to convince her by saying: "Father Damien will marry us without waiting for banns" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1988, p. 211), Fleur takes offence to this comment of Eli. Fleur is portrayed as a character who depicts a mind of her own who gets devastated and leaves without telling about her whereabouts when their ancestral lands are whisked away from them without any justification. Fleur and Pauline are a kind of alter ego for each other.

The ancestral cultural issues of *Tracks* (1988) which are put forth in the words of Nanapush become the cultural issues of the modern-day native Americans and mixed heritage Americans in *The Last Report* (2002) when, towards the end of the first book, after Fleur goes away, Nanapush declares:

Margaret and Father Damien begged and threatened the government, but once the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying, a blizzard of legal forms, a waste of ink by the gallon, a

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correspondence to which there is no end or reason. That's when I began to see what we were becoming....a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space of documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees....., diminished to ashes by one struck match" (Erdrich, *Tracks*, 1984, p. 225).

This vociferous declaration of Nanapush in *Tracks* (1988) about the blatant violation of rights of Anishnaabe is expressed in metaphorical terms in *The Last Report* (2002) at a number of places.

Erdrich, like many other Native American writers like Gerald Vizenor and Thomas King, to name just two, is influenced by the myth and folklore of her people especially the tradition of trickster. Smith (1997) believes that the tradition of the elusive and quick-tongued trickster is embedded in Erdrich's storytelling technique. Her stories, like a trickster, captivate the readers because "tricksters are consummate storytellers" who grab the attention of "their listeners with their artful use of words." This also helps "lending a sense of orality to the written text" (Smith, 1997, pp.22-23). Some characters of the two novels serve as perfect examples of mythical figures of tricksters. Characters like Nanapush hide a different face behind their jokes and teasing. Like a trickster, Nanapush, in the incident in *The Last Report* attempts to manipulate Father Damien into convincing his friend Kashpaw to keep only one of four wives. His apparent claim that he is worried about his friend Kashpaw's spiritual end is subtly exposed by Erdrich by bringing out his own intention to marry his fourth wife Margret Kashpaw. In the novel *Tracks*, Nanapush takes pride in the fact that he is named in honor of the trickster while telling tales to the listeners. He is a clever man, who besides being a healer and a storyteller, embodies the spirit of his name. Through Lulu, his stepdaughter Fleur's daughter, in other words his grand-daughter, to whom he gives his name, the tradition of the trickster is passed along to members of the Pillager family. This

ability to transform and to adapt becomes the key factor in the survival of many of the characters like Lulu, Pauline, Marie Kashpaw, and is also shown as the secret behind Nanapush's long and full life. Nanapush's not replacing the language of the Anishnaabe with English and speaking "both languages in streams ... alongside each other" (*Tracks*, p.7), can also be cited as an example of his being a trickster figure in a way.

Another character, Sister Leopolda (who was Pauline in *Tracks* and Leopolda in *The Last Report*), is a trickster figure who hides her reality under a mask of religiosity. She is thus an example of a double-faced typical representative of the governmental forces, a member of comprador class, who hide their real intents behind the veneer they ostensibly represent. Similarly, the figure of Father Damien, who, despite not being a Native American, acts as a trickster and commits heroic acts through an act of deception. She is a woman disguised as a priest. This diabolical presence of Damien-Agnes also raises the debate about identity and the split between male and female in a Native American culture as discussed above. This Damien-Agnes figure can also be taken as a symbolic one for those people who come from a mixed background and heritage. The people who struggle to define themselves as one or the other and are unable to find a balance between both.

This identity of a woman disguised as a man, and that too a religious man, Damien-Agnes, is emblematic of Native American tradition of using multiple voices and identities and is reminiscent of not only oral traditions of storytelling, but also hints at the fact that no story has a single side to it. It brings out the element of marginalization of the history of the Native American in the US. Native Americans, as stereotypically being presented as Red-Indian (or more precisely dead Indian) is the biggest lie that the settler-colonialism of white people has projected across all forms of knowledge mediums. This marginalization of the actual inhabitants of this land has been



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going on through the last five centuries. By presenting multiple points of view, Erdrich brings up the possibility of a counter narrative to the official reports that have served as history in the past. It encourages the readers to look beyond the surface meanings.

The comprador and trickster character of Pauline Payutt, later known as Sister Leopolda may be seen as an example. She is a strong presence in both the selected texts. In *Tracks*, a life changing event of murdering a man named Napoleon Morrissey changes her presence in the two novels. Pauline projects this murder as essentially a fight against the devil, who had come in disguise to tempt her to indulge in the sins of the flesh. It is, however, the trickster figure of Nanapush, that we learn that there might a more prosaic reason behind the murder – that Napoleon Morrissey is the father of Pauline's child; a child whose identity would bar her from her desire to become a nun. Resultantly, she would lose the opportunity to become a person of authority and power as a representative of the Church. On the other hand, this very act of murdering Napoleon Morrissey by Pauline is viewed as one of religious fervor and zeal by the other nuns on the reservation. Father Damien (actually a woman impersonating as Father as discussed above) in *The Last Report* suggests a much different interpretation, however. S/he believes that the murder is premeditated as Pauline strangles Napoleon with a rosary made from barbed wire. The wounds caused by the wire result in tetanus and lock jaw. This death resulting due to paralysis is thus mistakenly understood by others as religious communion.

Thus, we are left with the impression that everything Pauline Payutt has done has been a self-serving act but with some profoundly serious issues at the root. In the incident given above, the issues of religious conversion, loss of land and its resultant status in society, and impact of colonial dominance, are all present within the actions and decisions that Pauline Payutt has made in her life.

Like all her novels, the two under study also have their foundation in factual historical event of The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887. As a result of this act the right to practice all the native and local professions of any particular tribe were confiscated.<sup>6</sup> The historical period depicted in *Tracks* and *The Last Report* shows that those policies were supported by the United States government that encouraged the assimilation of all racial and ethnic groups within the dominant white society. The systematic destruction of Native American lifestyle, like the land of Fleur Pillager may be cited as an example where her tribe's lands are grabbed treacherously, and her tribe is unable to pay the land fees. Fleur's initial reaction of disbelief at the idea that the land she and her family have inhabited for hundreds of years can so suddenly be lost is also indicative of the loss of a colonized identity. Erdrich exposes the inner game of looting away Fleur's land, mostly a forested timber area, at the hands of a lumber company. The payment of the land fees is also an impossible task as no one on the reservation has the resources needed to collect that amount of money within the stipulated time. The inhabitants are all caught in a self-defeating cycle, from which they cannot perceive an escape. Thus, for the characters who did not fall into the government's strategies for assimilation and exploitation of land found themselves in a position where they were left without the means to earn sufficient money, or alternatively, without any land left to their name.

Erdrich's use of the magical incident of Fleur sawing through the base of the trees on her land can be recognized as one of the strategies she employs to incorporate elements of oral tradition into her work. In the account of the tornado in *Tracks*, she elaborates upon North Dakota folklore. Other magical episodes like Pauline's visions and flight as an Owl, Fleur's transformation into the bear etc. can be interpreted in the context of Ojibwa customs and beliefs. Similarly, Erdrich's use of a lyrical prose style incorporating vivid imagery in her

writings is yet another means to link a written text to an oral tradition.

### **Conclusion**

Native American authors and their works have shown a remarkable growth and development over the past fifty years despite the fact that Native American writers have had to master non-native methods in writing and form to achieve their goals. Vine Deloria Jr writes in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969, 1988) that most publishers still believe that a Native American cannot write, and if he does, the work would be biased in favor of the Indian (p. 97). For Deloria, the need for Native American writers to create their own place is of paramount importance. He feels, as does Roemer (1997) that a canon for Native American literature is necessary to establish a place for it in literary history; as well as an acknowledgement of the validity of the oral tradition and a questioning of the stereotypes created due to colonization. Most of all, it would enable the readers to look at Native American literature as not being from the margins but from the center – albeit one that has been dominated by a western point of view. Roemer goes on to write that “diversity of viewpoint about an Indian sense of traditional words and place, belief in the multiethnic nature of the Indian experience, and an acceptance of Indian identity coupled with strong resistance against one-dimensional definitions of Indianness” (Deloria *Custer*, 1969, 1988, p. 587) is the only way to challenge this racial discrimination. Deloria’s other seminal works like *God is red* (1973, 2003) and *Red Earth, White Lies* (1995) further draw attention to the belief that information provided about indigenous peoples is only found valid if it is offered by a white scholar recognized by the academia (*Red Earth*, 1995, p. 35).

A Native American writer like Erdrich is not only contributing to keeping the cause of Native Indian identity alive by portraying the survival of Ojibwa cultural tradition but is also

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bringing the mythical and ancestral folklores of her ancestry to the contemporary world. Her own work as novelist contributes to this purpose. She also explores the difficulties faced by mixed-blood characters as they try to come to terms with their heritage and place in the social order. The many narrators used in Erdrich's novels are essential. They are also an accurate depiction of Native American life as they not only belong to both central and marginal positions on the reservation, but also to different political and religious beliefs and genders.

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**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Anishinaabe (plural: Anishinaabeg) is the autonym for a group of culturally related indigenous peoples in what is known today as Canada and the United States. These include the Odawa, Saukteaux, Ojibwe (including Mississaugas), Potawatomi, Oji-Cree, and Algonquin peoples.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion, see our article, Rabia Aamir & Zainab Younus. (2018) "Contemporary Native American Literature and the World: Issues, Debates and Representation in Selected Literary Texts," *Pakistan Journal of American Studies*; Quaid-e Azam University, Islamabad. ISSN 1011-811X. Volume 36, No. 2 Fall. 39-61. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/pakistan-journal-of-american-studies/oclc/10611007>

<sup>3</sup> Since we have discussed a general trend of Native American Literature in the article mentioned in the previous note, here we are doing an in-depth analysis of two of the works of Erdrich.

<sup>4</sup> Reservations are the places or enclosures where different Native American tribes were forced to migrate from their native places that they were living in from centuries. Different tribes were pushed in different directions. They had to abandon their age-old ways of livelihoods and had to adopt only what the colonizers were offering them. Many history books, which were not initially recognized but now are an established body of literature have recorded these at length. See for instance, the books by Vine Deloria Junior, Dee Brown, Doug Boyd, and others, some of them given in the works cited above.

<sup>5</sup> We have discussed this at length in another submitted article for a journal. The concept of the Sacred Hoop primarily means that Life is a circle, and everything has a place in it.

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<sup>6</sup> We have discussed this issue at length in our other article. See, note 2.