



Preservation of Native American Culture: An Analysis of Louise Erdrich's Tracks

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Louise Erdrich's practice of promoting the oral tradition and magical realism as a way of preserving Native American culture in Tracks. She writes stories in the novel to assimilate Native American culture in modern times and this ultimately helps the Native traditions to find their way to modern readers. She represents magical elements in a realistic manner totally opposed to western concepts of magical realism. This study argues that Erdrich uses stories and magical realism as a tool to not only promote Native American culture but also preserve it. It is qualitative research and Gerald Vizenor's Theory of Resistance and Survivance has been used to analyze the text. The textual analysis reveals that oral tradition and magical realism have deep roots in Native American culture and Erdrich uses them to promote as well as preserve this culture.

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1. Introduction

Native American storytelling is not only a technique to document history but also a method to narrate the past. Storytelling helps Native Americans in healing their wounds given by the white intruders. The previous practice of the Natives was to communicate their stories verbally but now the impact of white settlers can be seen as stories are transferred through written words as well. This is due to the assimilationist tendency of the Native Americans. Traditionally it was believed that the process of writing stories hurt the originality of the stories as their purpose is to keep fluctuating and developing but contemporary Native writers such as Louise Erdrich believe that written works especially fiction can also play a vital role in achieving this purpose. Erdrich, through her novel Tracks, demonstrates that both verbal and written methods of communication can help in transferring cultural traditions and heritage and can have everlasting effect in survival of the traditions.

Just like other Native American tales, the stories narrated by Nanapush and Pauline in Tracks are same stories narrated in different manners. Both the characters carry their family heritage on their shoulders as they are the only ones left in their respective families due to some disease. They take help from their cultural stories to develop societies based on their traditions and rituals (Hughes, 2000). Moreover, both Nanapush and Pauline use their narratives not only to tell the reader about the real Native American society but also provide a social critique. They provide the reader with a chance to look into the deep layers of the Native American history (Hughes, 2000).

Both the characters undergo sufferings that result in loss and distress. They lose their families and have to rebuild their identities to survive in hostile environment. Besides their own stories, they describe the tale of Fleur Pillager, female protagonist of the novel. The narrations of both the narrators are different so the reader gets to know the tales from two different angles. Nanapush portrays Fleur's powers in an angelic manner whereas Pauline

considers Fleur a party to the devil. Although the stories within the novel mostly revolve around Fleur but they give insight into the narrator's lives as well. The tales narrated by Nanapush give an insight into his survival and relationships within his community. He uses his past experiences and learns from his sufferings to teach other important characters in the novel.

Pauline's stories depict her abandoning her traditional religion and conversion to Catholicism and her efforts to create her new identity. Readers suffering from bad experiences can also relate to these tales. The main difference between the tales of the two narrators is that Nanapush talks about the collective community whereas Pauline describes the stories of the individuals.

Stories make significant part of the society because without them it would be impossible for the people to comprehend and relish the experiences of individuals, tribes and communities. So, storytellers have great importance as well. According to Benjamin (1995), the storyteller takes lead from his experiences or community's experiences and then makes the reader take it as their own experience (87). The storyteller makes use of the memory and tries to transfer his cultural knowledge to the next generation. Louise Erdrich is an example of such a story teller. In her novel *Tracks* (1988), she not only describes the problems faced by the Chippewas, a Native American tribe, in preserving their land, traditions and cultures but also provides a detailed account of their stories and story tellers. She has narrated the stories in a typical "Indian" way. The "artistry of the Indian 'word sender' characterizes reality: peoples, landscapes, seasons, tonalizes, lightens, spiritualizes, brightens, and darkens human experience, all the while working with the reality that is" (Lincoln, 1983).

Erdrich depicts this reality by using two different narrators i.e. Nanapush and Pauline, having different voices. Nanapush is a traditional but prudent old man having gift of the gab and promotes his traditions through story telling. Contrary to Nanapush, Pauline is a young mixed blood. She abandons her traditions and converts to Catholicism and then suffers from psychological disorientation.

By using the character of Nanapush, Erdrich preserves the Indian tradition of storytelling. She intends to preserve memories, history, sufferings and cultural traditions by penning down these stories. She tries to record the tradition of Indian culture that is transferred and propagated from one generation to another only through stories. In this process, the storyteller may or may not alter the story in his own way (Sergi, 1992). Therefore "tracks" of Native Americans in general and of Anishinaabe Chippewa in particular can be seen in Erdrich's novel. The research questions is How does Erdrich use oral tradition and magical realism to preserve and promote Native American culture within *Tracks*?

2. Literature Review

Magical realism is a significant element used by the Native American writers in their writings. This magical realism seems strange and "unreal" to the outside world but magical elements are quite natural for the Native American societies (Chavkin & Chavkin, 1994). Native Americans consider magical realism a part of their historical existence. The storytelling tradition of Native Americans that includes mythologies and magical elements is greatly contested and opposed by the western writers. For Native American writers, oral traditions, mythologies and magical elements are foundations of their society as their removal can only lead to the destruction of their history. But the Euro-American literature deliberately disregards and neglects the importance of Native American orality and considers this tradition as only a way to project unreal things.

Lerelei Cederstrom opines that Native American writers like Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie clearly differentiate themselves from Western writers as they preserve Native American tradition in their writings. Cederstrom (1982) assert that these writers use ceremonial myths not only to make up the structure of the novel but also to provide life to the protagonists. (p. 285). Cederstrom (1982) opines that the theme of Native American literatures is not full of doom and gloom although it uses references from the past and talks about the despotic present. The consistent use of the past in their writings

represents their closeness to their traditions as well as their attempt to rescue their traditions in contemporary age.

Non-Native American writers have tried to represent Native American cultures and traditions but they failed miserably. Pleasant, Wigginton, and Wisecup (2018) criticize this practice of non-Native writers as they believe that they misrepresent the Native traditions and their culture. They assert that these writers do not depict Native American values accurately or precisely (p. 225). Fraser and Alexie (2000) has also condemned this approach of non-Native writers and has warned them of claiming authority of propagating Native American traditions. He states that these writers do not know the real essence of Native cultures, living standards and are completely unaware of socio-cultural values of Native American society. He affirms that literature of a specific territory must represent its values and it must be penned down by the Natives. He discards the writings of non-Native writers as they cannot represent Native American culture in its purity or entirety. He opines that these writers and their books are actually dominant, privileged and commanding and they document things about the colonized culture. In doing so, they intentionally undermine exclusivity of their culture. Therefore, for him, it is necessary that only mixed blood authors, or Native Americans must write about the Native culture and traditions. Non-Native writers are just like researchers looking for an unexplored field having no concern for the Native societies.

Colasurdo (1997) opines that the readers must read only mixed blood writers as they are the real presenters of Native American culture and beliefs. She believes that western writers show biased attitude while writing about Native socio-cultural traditions and values. She condemns the writing of white scholars who write about the Natives with the assistance of mixed blood translators (p. 374). These writers visit the Native lands and record the lived experiences of the people with the help of translators. They have no knowledge of Native people's languages so they have no right to pen down the lives of the Natives. According to Murray (1988), white writers attempt to explicate the subjective lives of the Natives but Natives are ultimately objectified by the white gaze (p. 34). Their writings are a great set back to the socio-cultural and historical traditions, customs and values and thus the Native American reject the biased representation of their culture by the white people (Shehzadi, 2018b).

Reid (2010) states that *Tracks* is a wonderful novel that portrays human feelings and relationships in their full essence. This text shows how modernization has damaged the lives of unified communities. She considers *Tracks* as a surprising and exciting text in which Erdrich talks about how Native Americans were forcibly dispossessed of their land. She gives importance to the Chippewa tribe, living in Dakota, trying to fight against the exploitative policies of the intruders (p. 38). Other critics opine that this novel is an attempt to glorify Native American culture and their history. Ferrari (1999) asserts that Erdrich uses narratives to let modern readers know about the traditional Native Americans and their history (p. 144). She believes that Erdrich, in her novel, has not only adopted oral tradition of Chippewa tribe quite tactfully and delicately but also has tried to glorify it before the outside world.

Shelia Hassell, a critic, explores issue of identity within this novel. The Chippewa tribe has not been discussed much within the Native American literature. Erdrich has written *Tracks* to bring this tribe into spotlight. Hassell opines that communal and individual identity of the subaltern people is the mainstay of this novel. It tries to raise voice for the underprivileged and forgotten Chippewa people (p. 88). Researchers have analyzed this novel through various angles. My research takes assistance from G. Vizenor (2009) concept of resistance and survivance and this point establishes the gap of my research.

3. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative and looks for the answer to how Erdrich takes help from Native American oral tradition to preserve their culture and values. It uses Gerald Vizenor's Theory of Resistance and Survivance. Gerald Vizenor's theory of survivance includes the practices of resistance that involve the continuation of traditional values as well as assimilation into the modern age to survive. According to G. Vizenor (2009), survivance is actually a literary activity as the Native writers act as "postindian warriors [who] encounter their enemies with the same courage in literature as their ancestors once evinced on horses [...] they create their stories with a new sense of survivance" (p. 4). He asserts that literary figures

can help in cultural survivance by writing about the history as traditions always play a role in promoting resistance.

G. Vizenor (2009) finds a strong link between survivance and manner of articulation or writing. He propounds those ways of expression can be considered as "the fourth person or voice in Native stories" (p. 103). For him, survivance discards the "monotheism" that denotes singular, non-Indigenous epistemologies (p. 103). The fourth voice actually challenges the prevailing and repressive narratives. He states that survivance is "presence over absence" and it is an ongoing process rather than a sudden reaction to a certain event (p. 85).

The foundation of survivance is to create presence. Survivance can be achieved through storytelling because stories provide a chance to produce shared spaces where authors can get rid of static discourse or stories. Survivance involves both action and reflection, but "[t]he theory is earned by interpretations" (p. 89). Interpretations form through literary production, in which theory and practice function cohesively: representing survivance, and being survivance. An intellectual force, survivance lives in the productive tension between theory and practice.

For Vizenor, writers, with their words, have this power of creating new world that revives and preserves their past and their identity (146). Writers must use this power to promote their cultural identity. His theory rejects Native American's stereotypical image made by the Euro-Americans and asserts that Natives must use their traditions to survive in hostile modern age (146). Vizenor states that the role of the story is to set individuals free of social shackles (147).

4. Analysis

Recording of oral history and tradition is necessary for its preservation. Native American scholars are trying to draw a connection and similarities between cultures of the past and their manifestation in the present. Native American writers like Erdrich represent their oral and mythical customs in their texts for both the Native and the non-Native readers. Erdrich in *Tracks* not only makes use of traditional storytelling but also provides the reasons behind the importance of this usage. She alludes to the traditional fables and folklores of Chippewa tribe and tries to preserve them by writing about them.

A Native American researcher Lincoln (1983) looks into the switch from oral tradition to documentation of these traditions. He describes Indian storytelling as the cultural continuation in which storyteller feeds next generation with their cultural history and heritage. These stories provide next generation to get inspiration from their beliefs and values and fight for survival (p. 222).

For Gerald Vizenor, none can transfer his cultural history without telling a story (Pulitano, 2003). This can be seen in Erdrich's *Tracks*, where an old man, Nanapush, a narrator, is transferring his culture by narrating things to Lulu, his granddaughter: "My girl, I saw the passing of times you will never know" (p. 2). He tells her stories from the past in order to make her understand their traditions, customs and myths. He is the oldest man of the tribe and knows ins and outs of the past as he has "guided the last buffalo hunt" (p. 2). So he is transferring history of his tribe through orality. Erdrich is documenting his oral traditions by alluding to these events in her text. She is making Nanapush a mouthpiece of the Chippewa tribe as he knows a lot about his tribe and the stories "are all attached" and "there is no end to telling" (46). Erdrich clearly promotes storytelling technique in her novel through Nanapush as he says: "I can only tell it step by step" (p. 109). She also shapes her novel as if Nanapush is talking to the readers directly and Lulu is projected as a silent reader as he asks her to "listen" silently (57).

For Native tribes, storytelling is an art and it also includes the manner of articulation. The narrative style of Nanapush directly refers to the oral traditions of Chippewa tribe. Erdrich acknowledges the distinction and peculiarity between the textual words and oral words. So she tries to keep the essence of the spoken words by using different stylistic features including repetitive and parallelism techniques in order to yield symmetry in the text.

Vizenor asserts elders like grandmothers or uncles tell stories to children in Native American tradition and this helps them "set free" from imposed shackles (Pulitano, 2003). The same can be seen in *Tracks*, as Nanapush asks Lulu to listen to him properly. Sometimes Lulu gets fed up of the Nanapush's stories but Nanapush brings her back to the track by chastising her and criticizing her impatience. He reminds her of her origins and her active part in promoting oral history: "I made her sit down and listen, just the way you are sitting now" (p. 178). So storytelling is a traditional process where one generation passes stories to another in order to keep their history preserved and alive.

Erdrich's projection of her narrator not only promotes the traditional significance of oral tradition of the tribe but also reminds the reader about the historical significance of the title of the novel. According to G. R. Vizenor (1984), Nanapush is a mythical trickster, in Chippewa tribe, who absorbs and experiences of the tribe and then breathes life into next generation by transferring stories (p. 4). Erdrich represents him as an instructor and therapist who maintains and endorses traditional values. He not only acts a benevolent figure but sometimes he is inclined towards force and violence. These contradictory characteristics of his personality epitomize his Chippewa origin.

Nanapush also tells the readers story about the source of his name. His description of his name showcase direct link with history. He says: "My father said, 'Nanapush. That's what you'll be called. Because it's got to do with trickery and living in the bush. Because it's got to do with something a girl can't resist. The first Nanapush stole fire. You will steal hearts'" (p. 33). Therefore, Nanapush tells readers of worth of tribal customs, mythologies and oral traditions. Erdrich provides her own version of mythologies to preserve them as well as let modern readers know about the Chippewa tribal traditions.

The name of the lake, Misshepesu, used in the novel also has roots in the history of Chippewa tribe. Besides the reference to medicine man, windigos, burial of people in the trees, manitous, dreamcatchers and gods of Chippewa tribe (p. 110) also give deep insight into the history.

Matchimanito Lake is used as the setting of the novel. It is a fictional place used by Erdrich but in Chippewa history, Matchimanito is actually a devil manito (Vecsey, 1983). Through other narrator, Pauline, Erdrich, preserves and presents Chippewa traditional notion of "the heaven of the Chippewa" when Fleur, the female protagonist, goes to this heaven to gamble for the Lulu's life (p. 160). Gerald Vizenor, in *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories*, asserts that the gambling activity has deep roots in Chippewa tradition. This allusion to gambling can be seen in *Tracks*. So, Erdrich tell stories about gambling which ultimately serves the purpose of preserving Native American culture.

Erdrich describes a water monster, Misshepesu, in this novel. This monster has significance in Chippewa mythologies. In the text, the origin of Misshepesu is linked with settling of Pillager tribe on Matchimanito Lake. It is thought that he gave Fleur all the powers and he kills people who annoyed Fleur.

Erdrich's portrayal of Misshepesu is quite similar to the description by another Native American scholar, Vecsey (1983). He asserts that Matchinmanito is linked with "the lion and the serpent" in Chippewa oral tradition (p. 75). It is thought to be symbol of humbleness, fear and respect and is involved in both harmful and beneficial acts. In some stories, it is accused of causing problems for the ships and consequently drowning people, whereas in other tales it has been presented as a helping figure who "fed and sheltered those who fell through the ice."

Erdrich alludes to these attributes throughout her text. After Fleur returns to Argos, people assume that it is Fleur who "keep the lake thing controlled"(p. 35). Here, the thing is Matchimanito, which was violent before Fleur returned. People thought Fleur had sexual relationship with the water monster and they also questioned Lulu's fatherhood as her eyes were "blazed bright" (p. 70).

Pauline becomes skeptical of her religion and ultimately disowns it as she thinks "New devils require new gods" (p. 195).

Erdrich, through Pauline, talks about the terrible characteristics of Misshepesu. Pauline considers Lake Monster a devil. Erdrich uses Misshepesu to promote Native customs, folklores and traditions. The language she uses to describe this water monster is a symbol of oral tradition.

The narratives are circular and serpent like and a way to continue process. For Vizenor, the storytelling actually helps in survivance during hard times. Erdrich uses Nanapush's narrations to prove Vizenor's point. Nanapush clearly asserts when the consumption disease was engulfing people, he saved himself "by starting a story" and "Death grew discouraged, and traveled on" (p. 46). He rejected notion of death and promoted life and his name with his oral tradition of storytelling. Nanapush saves Lulu with his stories as he had knowledge of words and songs that help sick to get cured. She was "lulled with the sound of [his] voice" and he healed her of frostbite with the help of traditional medicine (p. 67).

Nanapush considers this storytelling as a form of preservation, existence and survival in modern age. He uses his "brain as a weapon" to preserve the history (p. 118). He used stories "without limit or end" for this purpose (p. 145). He not only considers oral tradition and words as a symbol of power but also disliked white man's written words. For him, writing the name on a paper gets all the power from the Native as he loses his land by signing a government file (p. 32). For him, when you write something, you disown your traditions and become powerless. Through the character of Nanapush, Erdrich looks into switch from orality to writing. This helps in making modern readers understand the Chippewa oral traditions.

Every culture in the world has its distinctive mythologies. The study of these myths leads to the origins of these cultures. By keeping this in mind, Erdrich explores the peculiarity of Native American culture regarding its oral tradition. Although she promotes history, she also highlights the necessity of assimilation in modern societies. She asserts the hybrid nature of Native American society in *Tracks* where Native people have to assimilate to survive without disowning their culture. She gives references to certain events that promote magical realism, which is an important part of Native American tribes. According to Genette (1988), Erdrich uses Nanapush and Pauline, two narrators, to create a Native American world where natural and magical elements coexist without any conflict (p. 72). For Native Americans, it is quite normal but the foreigners take it as unreal. She uses magical realism to preserve Native American culture and traditions.

Magical realism and its elements can be seen from the outset of the novel. The novel opens with Nanapush telling granddaughter Lulu about the deadly white man's disease that ate Native people in the winter of 1912. The actual facts are associated with unreal events of ghosts and spirits living on abandoned places. Erdrich explains the concepts of Anishinaabe people about dead and how these dead get their revenge on their enemies. For instance, the Chippewa myth of miserable lives of people has been explained by Erdrich. The myth says that the unburied spirits roam around and make lives of the people miserable and the same happened with policeman Pukwan in the novel. Nanapush and Pukwan tried to burn dead Pillagers instead of burying them. This led to the death of Pukwan because of the "dissatisfied spirits" (p. 4). They ignore the oral tradition of burying people from sacred tribe of Chippewa Anishinaabe as Pukwan tried to "burn" them and their houses but failed in his attempt (p. 3). The Natives considered that their lives and land were spared by the dead Pillagers who cursed Pukwan, policeman, that resulted in his death as he "came home, crawled into bed, and took no food from that moment until his last breath passed" (p. 4). In order to explain this whole episode, Erdrich mixes natural and magical elements in such a way that it seems quite unreal to the reader. This promotes not only mythical stance of Native Americans but also preserves their oral tradition.

Erdrich describes Fleur Pillager's character as a magical one having powers to repel white intruders. In her tribe, Fleur is taken as a symbol and protector of Anishnaabe traditions. Due to certain government policy, Fleur, just like other people, had to sell her land. But she did not oblige to the orders and continued living on her land. Chippewa tribe considered her the last hope as they believed she had the magical powers to keep the land grabbers at a bay. Whenever men from the lumber company tried to occupy her land, they suffered problems and some of them died (p.227). The episodes regarding the problems faced by people coming in

contact with Fleur give readers an insight into the use of magical realism in these stories. It not only highlights the normal response of Natives to these magical elements but also preserves the Anishanaabe tradition.

The oral tradition of Chippewa tribe can be seen through various other events that include magical elements. For instance, people considered Fleur having relationship with water monster Misshepesu, and the people who observe Fleur in the lake get punished by the monster. Erdrich describes an event when Fleur was of fifteen years and was lying unconscious by the lake. A Native American named George Many Woman approached Fleur's "dull dead gray [body] and bent to look closer." Fleur opened her eyes and said "You take my place [on Chippewa three-day-death road]" (p. 11). Natives believed that Fleur's destiny became George Many Woman's as he "slipped, got knocked out" and breathed his last in the washroom (p. 11).

In addition to this event, there are certain events described when Fleur was saved from drowning and those who saved her found dead or disappeared later on. Fleur's husband, Eli Kashpaw was also wary of their child having "strange and fearful, bulging eyes, maybe with a split back tail" (p. 108). Erdrich talks about these events and Fleur's magical powers in such a manner that the readers consider the beliefs of Chippewa tribe true and real. The continuous linking of natural and supernatural elements preserves Anishinaabee oral tradition.

Erdrich, through Nanapush and Pauline, explains the mysterious characters of Fleur Pillager with the help of magical realism. The way she does it further strengthens and preserves the storytelling tradition of Anishinaabe people. They do not openly discuss their magical powers. Reader comes across their beliefs through realistic presentation of these magical happenings. Erdrich does not make things up rather she describes the actual beliefs of Anishinaabe people. Her description of ghosts or spirits and other supernatural things has roots in Chippewa oral tradition. She helps in preserving this tradition by writing on it. Lazarre is punished by Fleur because she catches him watching her in the lake and "tied him up, cut his tongue and, then sewn it in reverse" (p. 49).

In *Argus*, Fleur is raped by three men after being defeated by her in card game. The oral tradition claims that Fleur took revenge with the help of her magical powers as she set up a hurricane. Although hurricanes are not mythical but the following mysterious episode of the deaths of only rapists make things unreal and magical. They try to hide themselves in a freezer in butcher's storeroom to avoid hurricane. The butcher's storeroom remains safe but they die and people think that it is due to Fleur's powers. Dutch James successfully avoids the death in tornado but his pathetic condition makes people believe in powers of Fleur: "Dutch James rotted in the bedroom, sawed away, piece by piece. First the doctor took one leg mostly off, then the other foot, an arm up to the elbow. His ears wilted off his head" (p. 62). The convincing and realistic presentation of these events promotes the oral tradition of Anishinaabe people.

Chippewa tribe considers Traditional medicines very useful for any sickness. But common people do not know much about the plants and medicines extracted from them. They consider Fleur as medicine woman who have secret knowledge of these plants that have helped people in healing process. She knows "Plant after plant [...] gathered from the woods or shore or the bottom of the lake" (p. 156). Erdrich, in her novel, describes the interspecies communication in a very realistic manner. She describes in such a linear and orderly manner that explains Chippewa tribe's oral traditions and beliefs. For example Erdrich reveals connection of Moses Pillager with cats. People thought he was dead but he was lying in the woods, numb as bears in a winter den" (p. 7).

Louise Erdrich explains supernatural events throughout her novel to promote mythical beliefs of Chippewa tribe. While working in a butcher's shop, Fleur was cooking animal heads and Erdrich describes her appearance as a water-goddess. She was wearing a green dress "drenched, wrapped her like a transparent sheet. A skin of lake weed. Black snarls of veining clung to her arms. Her braids were loose, half unraveled, tied behind her neck in a thick loop" (p. 22). Erdrich describes Fleur as a goddess and then compares her to a bear. Chippewa people believe in transforming into a bear. People told number of stories where tracks of Fleur "changed, where the claws sprang out the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night [they] heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough" (p. 12). Their believe in these stories was

strengthened at Lulu's birth when "the bear heard Fleur calling, and answered ... drew up and sat on her haunches like a dog" (p. 59). Erdrich presents this episode in a magical way as the bear did not harm anyone and disappeared. People thought it was a spirit bear.

5. Conclusion

For Native Americans, preservation of their traditions along with survival in the contemporary age is the most important thing. Nanapush and Pauline, two narrators, preserve and pass along their history through storytelling. Erdrich, in *Tracks*, writes these stories and let the reader know about Native American culture and traditions. She also describes events through magical realism which tells the reader that it has deep roots in Anishinaabe culture. She textualizes myths as well as oral tradition of Native American tribes and shows their interconnection. She aptly uses magical realism and trickster stories to keep the history alive and mingle it with present situation to make oral traditions well-kept and saved for the forthcoming generations.

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