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“DEFINING OURSELVES”: IDENTITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*

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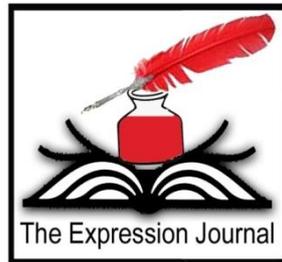
Abstract

The Native Americans present the curious case of being the inconspicuous minority in majoritarian USA. They are the colonised in one of the world's oldest modern colonies but they can never dream of decolonization. Curiously, the identity of the Native American is tied to the mainstream European settler culture. While most of the indigenous Americans seem to have accepted the assimilation, some Native Americans resist the normalizing tendencies of the mainstream culture. This position of these people is seen as regressive and crude by the mainstream population. At the same time, these actions of the Native American communities have resulted in the establishment of their identity as one different from the other ethnic communities in the new world. Louise Erdrich, a contemporary Chippewa writer, presents the dilemma of the Native Americans, in her novel *Tracks*. The novel is presented in the Chippewa storytelling tradition through the voices of two narrators – Nanapush and Pauline. While the former is a tribal elder who wants cultural preservation and indigenous identity, the latter is enamoured by the new cultural values. The story of Fluer, the protagonist, is presented through the voices of these duelling narrators. The novel presents the dichotomy of Native American existence in the new America of the twentieth century. This paper presents this dilemma of Native American identity through the eyes of Louise Erdrich.

Keywords

Identity, Native American Literature, Louise Erdrich,
Self-Determination, Assimilation.

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Placing the Native American at the top of the list of non-European ethnic groups in America, Martin Padget traces the decline of the rulers of the land as they moved from the status of the mighty natives to a "socially, economically and politically marginalized" community in modern American society. Historically, the United States had ethnic minorities from the start, but its approach towards these groups has been assimilationist. Despite the fact that America boasts of one of the most liberal humanist cultures, its attitude towards the non-conformists has been antagonistic. Deliberate efforts have been made by American governments to unify and bring under one common fold the different cultural variations propagated by the ethnic communities.

Peter Weinreich defines identity as "the totality of one's self construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (317). Native American writer Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* documents the pathetic situation of the Indian community in a fictional world in the state of North Dakota. The story of the female protagonist Fleur is told in the voices of two opposing narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, the difference in their perspectives making this novel significant in the postcolonial sense.

Applying Homi Bhabha's definition of the postcolonial perspective as "a substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity ... that rationalize the authoritarian, "normalizing" tendencies within cultures in the name of national interest", (4) a postcolonial reading of the literatures of the ethnic minorities becomes essential. The concept of the homogenous nation that pervaded through the policies of assimilation silently killed the cultural practices of the non-whites in the country of liberty.

Often, the purview of postcolonialism misses the literature of the Native American in favour of the erstwhile colonized. The geographical position of these people inside one of the earliest colonies of the modern world and the fact that the United States is no longer referred to as a colony add to the confusion. The pitiable truth is that these natives can never reclaim their land, as the white masters have already made it their own. Though some critics make conscious efforts to include the natives of countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in the postcolonial discourse, the Red Indian is still kept out of such attempts.

A series of treaties and laws from the successive governments of independent America followed westward displacement of the Native Americans. These treaties carefully removed the natives from their land, language, and other cultural practices. The General Allotment Act of 1887, popularly known as the Dawes Act, provided legitimacy to the governmental policies of assimilation. This hegemony on the part of the government helped the ruling European settlers make their values and interests central to what they called the common, neutral culture. The act provided land allotments to families that accepted to give up their traditional practice of hunting for food and take up farming as their vocation. Lured by the quickly vanishing material benefits, a majority of the natives accepted the treaties and walked into the reservations.

After the stipulated period of 25 years, these land allotments were taken over by the whites for paltry sums of money, leaving the natives landless in their own land. At the end of the 47 years that the law was in force, 90,000 Native Americans were rendered homeless. Interestingly, the first draft of the Dawes Act leaves out five main tribes of the American Indian population, labeling them as 'civilized'. This prescriptive approach towards the native culture can be summed up using the Gramscian term, 'Velvet Domination'.

In this novel, Nanapush, the local senior leader of the Chippewa community expresses his anguish at the loss of land. As devastating illnesses sweep away the young and the old of the tribal community, Nanapush, the unusual elder in his 50s, narrates the enforcement of the treaty. "I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake". (Erdrich, 2) He continues his bitter experience saying, "We stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step". (4)

History reveals that the land granted to most allottees was not sufficient for economic viability, and division of land between heirs upon allottees' deaths resulted in land fractionalization. Most allotment land, which could be sold after a statutory period of 25 years, was eventually sold to non-Native buyers at bargain prices. Nanapush scorns at the way the whites exploited the poor economic condition of the natives to take away their land. "Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred pound weight of flour". (8)

For the sensitive some like Nanapush, the loss of land and the destruction of the woods for lumbering was more than the loss of property. He feels it as a personal loss. "I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and

another was lost, as a gap formed here, a clearing there, and plain daylight entered". (9)

Edward Said opines that western orientalism worked at two levels. First, it legitimizes western expansionism and imperialism and then it convinces the natives that western culture represented universal civilization. The colonizers believed this would liberate the natives from their superstitions if they accepted the western culture and would make them participants in 'the most advanced civilization the world has ever seen'. Cultural practices like the native languages, religion, and practices were also replaced by the English language, Christianity, and the 'rational habits' constructed by the Europeans. The so-called rational, democratic, and progressive settler culture thus dethroned the sensual, irrational, and primitive native culture.

Though *Tracks* supports the real, unchanging native in Nanapush, the stand of Pauline is significant as well because it presents the complicity of the majority of natives to western culture. When Pauline, the young narrator, decides to go to the town to seek employment, her father warns her: "'You'll fade out there," he said... "You won't be an Indian once you return.'" (14) Pauline believes her pro-white stand to be the only way to survive. She realizes that "to hang back was to perish". (14)

The native attitude towards Christianity is presented through the diametrically opposite views of the two narrators. Pauline, despite priding herself of her obsession with Christianity, makes fun of the attitude of the different factions within Christianity. "Two stores competed for the trade of the three hundred citizens, and three churches quarrelled with one another for their souls". (13) Though critical of Christianity at the first instance, Pauline joins the catholic order as nun Leopolda, not before entering into a sensual physical relationship and mothering a baby girl. Nanapush continues his tirade against the white religion. He considers it to be hand in glove with the land burglars. "Some natives", he tells, "signed their land away with thumbs and crosses". (99) When Father Damien tries to preach the gospel to him, Nanapush counters him, saying, "A god who enters through the rear door is no better than a thief". (110) Though the Anishinabe gods were not "exactly perfect", at least they "did not require sitting on hand [church] planks", he believed. (110)

The Dawes Act, with its emphasis on individual land ownership, negatively impacted the unity, self-government, and culture of Indian tribes. The assimilation process was enforced through systematic deterioration of the communal life-style of the Native societies and imposing Western-oriented values of strengthening the nuclear family and values of economic dependency strictly within this small household unit. When the epidemics took their toll, a large number of natives, including the senior Nanapush and Fleur, the young protagonist, were left without the community to support. Nanapush laments his pitiable condition as an old man who had "to live alone, cook for himself, braid his own hair, (and) listen to his silence". (33)

Apart from the harmful effects of the policy of assimilation on the social and religious lives of the natives, these programmes also destroyed the family. The

Indian community was scattered into bits and pieces of families through mechanical allotments. Further, the rulers pressed into the community the European nuclear family system, replacing community living of the natives. The clauses of the Dawes Act provided allotments for those who discarded the traditional practice of hunting in favour of agriculture. This made the native man replace the lady as the farmer, while women were given the new role of homemakers, depriving them of economic independence. The European ideology of patriarchal inheritance substituted the matrilineal style of the natives. Sensitive to these issues, Nanapush teaches the young Eli Kashpaw, Fleur's lover, to hunt, whereas Fleur takes up hunting all by herself. The problems are compounded by the fact that the mixed bloods in the reservations prospered while the proud natives suffered.

The carefully constructed assimilation efforts of the white governments thus decimated the native culture including the language, habits, lifestyle, religion, and the social institutions. The novel presents the dilemma of this oppressed people through the two narrators, one bound by the commitment to preserve the past and the other realizing the need to become part of the larger world beyond. The mixed parentage and the sense of identity loss in the writer Louise Erdrich add to the dilemma.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation marks the indigenous groups of the world as the most vulnerable group in the world, due to persecution and deprivation. It notes that “despite their numbers and relevance to food and nutrition security, Indigenous Peoples are among the most marginalized subgroups ... The lack of respect to their basic human rights, cultures, spirituality and traditions, and the encroachment on their traditional lands and natural resources increase their vulnerability by undermining livelihoods, shelters and identity”. (FAO, 1)

Literary writing under colonial rule would either express complicity with western hegemony or take the diametrically opposite counter-hegemonic stance. As Shelley Reid remarks, *Tracks* is the story of “the Native American identity, the connection of an individual with the history of his or her tribe” (16). *Tracks* is unique as it presents both the options in presenting the resultant culture loss. In a period when the identity of an individual is the focus in literature, this novel presents the problem in a larger canvas, trying to define a lost race in terms of its culture.

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Bio-Note

David Jeyaraj Franklin has been English language and literature at the Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University), Gandhigram, Dindigul Dt, Tamil Nadu, since 2011. His PhD on "Being Native: A Tribal Critical Reading of Select Twentieth Century Indigenous Novels", awarded in April 2021, is a pioneering attempt at a parallel reading global indigenous literatures. He is the recipient of a Fulbright Nehru Doctoral Research Fellowship to the University of Montana, USA, in 2016-17. He lives with his family in Madurai.