

Original Paper

Survival and Continuation: An Analysis of the Women
Characters of the American Indian Community in Louise
Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*

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Abstract

The Night Watchman is a novel published by Native American woman writer Louise Erdrich in 2020. The book tells the story of an Indian tribe located in the Turtle Mountain Reservation in the 1950s which makes arduous efforts to prevent the US government from enacting Termination Bill and relocation plan. The author vividly displays the unity of the tribal people in the Turtle Mountain Reservation. At the same time, the images of American Indian women are portrayed in details. In the mainstream white society, Indian images, especially Indian women's images, always seem to be shrouded in mystery due to the long-term neglect and discrimination. At the time, Indian women were facing two crises: firstly, as women, they failed to avoid the fate of being persecuted; Secondly, as the members of the Indian community, their tribal survival and development were under threat. Therefore, analyzing the images of American Indian women in Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* not only enables the public to pay attention to the identity and awareness of Native American women, but also helps readers better understand how the female characters in the book shape their unique gender and cultural identity through persistence and resistance.

Keywords

The Night Watchman, Louise Erdrich, American Indian Community, Female Identity, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

American poet and novelist Louise Erdrich was born in Minnesota in 1954. Her father is a German American while her mother is half of Chippewa and half of French. Erdrich's grandfather served as the chairman of the Turtle Mountain Reservation for many years. Therefore, her frequent visits to the Indian reservation gave her a certain understanding of the Turtle Mountain Reservation. As one of the important writers of American Indian literature, Erdrich has published several novels with the themes of Native

American characters and background, such as *The Round House*, *Love Medicine*, and *The Night Watchman*. In 2021, her novel "*The Night Watchman*" won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

The Night Watchman is set in North Dakota in the 1950s and tells the story of the struggle of a Chippewa tribe against the government's attempt to end federal support for reservations. The protagonist of this novel is Thomas Wazashk who is based on the prototype of Erdrich's grandfather, a night watchman of a jewel bearing plant in Turtle Mountain Reservation and also a member of the Ojibwe parliament. Under Thomas Wazashk's leadership, the Turtle Mountain Reservation wins the battle and manages to survive. Another story line of the novel is about Thomas' niece Patrice whose experience of family, love, work, and hardship is emphatically narrated, with a focus on her adventure to search for her sister Vera in Minneapolis. During the journey, she suffers from danger and persecution which she finally overcomes through her wisdom and strong will.

2. Literature Review

There have been some related studies on Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* domestically and internationally. Amel Abbady has analyzed non-human elements in her thesis to demonstrate "how the author challenges historical orthodoxy through magical realism narratives and re-imagine Native American history from the perspective of 'being deprived to speak and being marginalized'" (p. 31). Zhang Yanlin and Tang Qu have explored "the community consciousness in the novels by analyzing the connections between women and nature, as well as between humans and non-humans under the theory of Biocentric Equality of Deep Ecology" (p. 22). Yang Zhiyi has analyzed the "formation and transmission of intergenerational trauma and the healing in Indian families based on the theory of intergenerational trauma" (p. 53). By combing the development of historical traditions, Zhang Qiong has also analyzed "how the cultural and historical reconstruction through literature confronts the political intent of the Termination Bill" (p. 14).

A comprehensive review of the related researches on Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* mainly focuses on the construction of an ethnic community, magical non-human elements, and the analysis of the survival difficulties of the Indian ethnic group through trauma theory and narrative analysis. Currently, there is few in-depth researches of female images which are appealing in this novel. In *The Sacred Hoop Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen, an American Indian female scholar, strives to confirm the importance of female role in Indian culture, emphasizing the significance of female cultural traditions for the continuity and survival of Indian culture. "She points out that Indian male literature lays stress on the changes brought by the colonial process as well as the alienation and anxiety about the extinction of Native Americans, while the theme of Indian female literature is about continuation, adaptation and survival" (Jin, p. 100). Therefore, when studying female roles, it is necessary to pay more attention to the marginalized situations faced by women in order to deeply study the survival, development, and continuity of Indian community. In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich characterizes the group which has been hidden for a long time. Thus, analyzing the female characters in this book has great significance.

3. The Historical Development of American Indian Women

In traditional Indian culture, many deities are associated with women rather than men, reflecting the ethnic psychological reality of sanctifying and beautifying female characteristics and revealing the true, sacred, and unique feminist tradition of Native Americans. Paula Gunn Allen points out that:

“traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and they are never patriarchal. These features make understanding tribal cultures essential to all responsible activists who seek life-affirming social change...for millennia American Indians have based their social systems, however diverse, on ritual, spirit-centered, woman-focused world-views” (Paula, 1992, p. 2).

Before the invasion of European colonizers, women often held leadership positions in the tribes. They emphasized the value of women as mothers and providers of the families. In terms of spiritual life, women are seen as the continuation of the goddess and the transmission of blood lineage. In social life, women are also the culture disseminator. Therefore, many Native American tribes believed that they originated from women, and “Mother Earth” has been worshiped in many legends and creation stories. Women are the creators of human life, and the earth is the creator of the lives of all things. By using the analogy of “mother of the earth,” women serving as mothers in traditional Indian culture reflects that “they are not only the creator of life, but also the continuation of Indian culture” (Xu, p. 136). Since the Europeans invaded America and brought the colonial rule for centuries, American Indian women have undergone tremendous changes. “The physical and cultural genocide of American Indian tribes is and was mostly about patriarchal fear of gynocracy. The Puritans particularly, but also the Catholic, Quaker, and other Christian missionaries, like their secular counterparts, could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society” (Paula, 1992, p. 18). Since then, some tribes began to adopt patriarchal gender roles and restrict women’s sexual freedom through laws and regulations. Therefore, the position of American Indian women has been eroded.

4. The Analysis of the Women Images in *The Night Watchman*

In *The Night Watchman*, the author portrays a series of female characters with unique personalities and life experiences. This article will mainly focus on three of the most typical female characters in the novel: Zhaanat, Patrice, and Millie. All these female characters share several virtues; they are independent, brave, resolute, and witty. They rise up to resist when threatened and persecuted, and they choose to unite as one with their tribal people to fight against the Termination Bill when facing the crisis of racial and cultural identity, refusing to integrate into mainstream American culture and exerting themselves to protect their land and their racial identity.

4.1 Zhaanat—*The Cultural Inheritor of Indigenous Traditions*

Zhaanat is the character that Erdrich portrays in order to reproduce the primitive images of the long-hidden traditional Indian women. Zhaanat, Patrice’s mother, is capable and shrewd. She is a representative of traditional and old-time Indian raised by her grandparents only speaking Chippewa, schooled from childhood in ceremonies and the teaching stories. To avoid being assimilated by

mainstream culture, she has been fiercely hidden away and guarded from going to boarding school. Boarding schools are the institution from white Americans who attempt to assimilate Native Americans by indoctrinating them with the language and thoughts of the White society, thereby erasing their racial identity as Native Americans and ultimately exterminating the group of Native Americans. However, not everyone dares to refuse boarding schools. “The day schools on the reservation gave out just one meal while the government boarding schools would feed three meals” (Louise, p. 94). Some Native Americans who struggle with hunger have to attend boarding schools. Thomas Wazashk is one of them. In order to comply with the regulations of the boarding schools, they have to violate the Indian traditions like cutting their braids, and cutting one’s braids is not only a way of grieving for the deceased in Indian tradition, but also the first step towards losing their racial identity. Fortunately, Zhaanat is well hidden because “her knowledge is considered so important” (Louise, p. 25). Although she makes baskets and beadwork to sell, her real job is passing what she knows. She has barely learned to read and write on the intermittent days she has attended reservation day school, implying that she passes on knowledge to others through word-of-mouth communication, a primitive Indian way of teaching.

In order to learn the skills and knowledge, people come from distances, and often camp around her house. The knowledge they learn is part of a web of strategies that include animal hunting, wild food gathering, gardens and land, which is a manifestation of the close connection between human and nature, confirming the idea that man is an integral part of the Nature in Indian civilization. “Gynocentric communities tend to value peace, tolerance, sharing, relationship, balance, harmony, and just distribution of goods” (Paula, 1991, p. 14). By portraying the character of Zhaanat, the author restores the image of primitive tribal women who serve as disseminators of cultural knowledge and impart the unique wisdom and survival skills of the tribe to others through oral communication, and the author also reconstructs a beautiful picture of the traditional life of Indian community.

Moreover, like many Indian female deities such as Thinking Woman, Changing Woman, White Shell Woman who possess creative power and bring forth through supernatural ritual a variety of beings, Zhaanat also has mysterious power as she can perceive the whereabouts of her missing daughter through dreams and nurse her grandchildren through lactation. “The relations between human women and supernaturals are as viable and powerful in the present time as in days gone by” (Paula, 1991, p. 14). The supernatural power and the distinctive way of perception subvert the White culture featured by “science” and “logic”, which not only protects their people, but also represents their traditional role of continuing their bloodline from ancient times to present. And this power is also an integral part of unique identity of the Native American.

Therefore, Zhaanat not only inherits the language and culture of the Chippewa tribe, but also guards the unique racial identity as a Native American. In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich presents the image of primitive Native American women who has not been assimilated by mainstream American culture, and also represents the role of continuation and development in both lineage and traditional culture knowledge. The depiction of Zhaanat is not only an authentic image of Indian women, but also recalls

this precious cultural and gender identity in today's mainstream white culture, sealing it permanently in literary works.

4.2 *Patrice—An American Indian Woman in New Age*

In the book, the author keeps mentioning, in an indirect or direct manner, the cases of persecution against women in the 1950s, such as sexual assault and murder. In an interview, Erdrich pointed out that since Native Americans began to come into contact with Europeans, indigenous women on reservations have become prey in the eyes of criminals and sex traffickers, a phenomenon that continues to this day. For this reason, Erdrich hopes to raise public awareness of the missing and murdered Native American women. Erdrich takes special focus on the character of Patrice through whom she vividly depicts a brave and tough image of the Native American women. Therefore, the role of Patrice is worth discussing.

4.2.1 A Rebel against the White Patriarchal Society

Patrice is a representative of American Indian women in the new era, and also a representative of female consciousness awakening. As one of the protagonists in *The Night Watchman*, she inherits and masters the language and traditional cultural knowledge of the Chippewa like her mother Zhaanat. However, she is also proficient in English and has experienced the crisis of ethnic Indian women who have been ravaged or attacked in the relocation plan. Through the character of patrice, Erdrich presents the persecution and survival difficulties faced by Indian women, in an attempt to trigger readers' attention and reflection on the marginalized situation and consciousness of Native American women.

As the protagonist connecting the relationships between the characters in the book, Patrice is created vividly, and is thought-provoking. Patrice is intelligent, brave and sometimes stubborn and suspicious. Her tough and sensitive personality is detectable as she is one of the distinct victims in the book. Due to poverty and the lack of transportation, Patrice has to walk to school, but she is often invited by a white boy Bucky to take a ride. Unfortunately in an ordinary hitchhiking, Bucky unveils his animal side and tries to violate her:

“Bucky threw himself back on her. Myron held her arms. She twisted, tried to kick. Bucky's hands went under her shirt and his fingernails dug into her. Then he tried to press her knees apart with his knees and fumbled with his pants” (Louise, p. 314).

Although she later manages to escape by swimming by the lake, since then, she has become a suspicious person. As Foucault believes where there is power, there is resistance (Michel, p. 80). Resistance exists in power relations, so rulers and the ruled can change their power relationships through resistance. For Patrice, Bucky represents a patriarchal ruler and disciplines her with patriarchal discourse, constantly suppressing her desires and freedom as a woman. Her revolt subverts the relationship between the superiors and the subordinates in order to change the power relationship between them.

What's more, Bucky also spreads the rumors that “she had been so willing to do something she had not done” (Louise, p. 12). Patrice's plight is exactly what Simon Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*: “She is a subordinate person, a secondary person; he is the subject, an absolute person, and she is the Other” (Simone, p. 16). Through the character of Patrice, Erdrich not only presents the survival dilemma

of Indian women being oppressed and manipulated by white men, but also constructs a courageous and scheming image of Indian women. In the face of danger and threat, she does not go down without a fight. On the contrary, she successfully escapes from danger through her physical skills and adaptability to nature. Her self-resistance is precisely breaking free from the constraints of patriarchal discourse, restoring female self-subjectivity.

4.2.2 A Victim under the Relocation Plan

The relocation plan makes Indian women suffer more persecutions. Even though Patrice is cautious enough, she falls into the trap of white men on her way to City to look for her missing sister Vera. Under the temptation and other conditions from the white men, Patrice takes over the job as a waterjack from an Indian woman, Hilda Kranz who is severely ill. She is made to wear a poisonous rubber outfit resembling a cow and perform underwater, becoming a view for the audience who pay for watching it. In other words, she becomes the Other who is being stared upon.

Patrice's sister Vera is also a victim of the relocation plan. Attracted by the relocation plan, Vera and her husband go to the City of Minneapolis, and there is no news of them afterwards. During Patrice's search for her sister, there are some clues mentioned to reveal Vera's or other missing Indian women's hopeless conditions:

"Patrice got up and quickly opened the doors to the next rooms. In each one, a filthy mat, a gnarled blanket, sometimes shit, the smell of piss, a chain bolted into the wall and at the end of each chain an empty dog collar. In one room, a line of beer bottles on the windowsill. Behind the last door was a stinking waterless bathroom. Strips of an old sheet. Dried blood. 'She died on the end of a chain, like me,' said the dog" (Louise, p. 136).

Although Erdrich does not indicate that this is exactly the situation of the missing and murdered Indigenous women, but the unsettling scenes hint at the nightmare of them. This nightmare lurks in the book until halfway through, a terrifying chapter brings the focus to the true victim and her fate:

"The men smelled of hot oil, liquor sweat, spoiled meat, a million cigarettes, and they spoke in the language of the wolverine. Their beards ground against her face until her cheeks were raw. If she wanted to get away, she'd have to run through knives. If she got through the knives, she would have no skin left to protect her. She would be raw flesh. She would be a thing. She would be agony" (Louise, p. 208).

The title of this chapter is "Agony Would Be Her Name". Although the entire chapter is only several sentences long, the bloody scenes depict the desperate situation of Indian women who are tormented and unable to escape. Today, Indian women still suffer from unspeakable persecution. This book criticizes the oppression and injuries inflicting on them brought by the white patriarchal society, vividly presents their harsh survival circumstances to the world, and tells the tragic experiences of the Indian women being sexually assaulted and trafficked, hoping to arouse attention and reflection on the crises of American Indian women.

4.2.3 A Representative of Female Consciousness Awakening and Reconstruction of Self-Identity

“The awakening of consciousness is initially an analysis of the class structure of oppression, while the awakening of female consciousness refers to the transformation of oppressed experiences in daily life into critical consciousness and social activities by women in the oppressed class” (Dai, p. 172). In the book, Patrice’s move to bid farewell to her past and change her name are the symbol of her awakening of female consciousness. Patrice’s full name is Pixie Paranteau. But since graduating from high school, she has been insisting that people around her should call her Patrice instead of Pixie which means “cute” and “adorable” in Chippewa. Although she has a petite figure, being cute is not what Patrice wants to be. Patrice, as her newly constructed identity, can make her forget the time when she was once oppressed and bullied. When she was still “Pixie”, she struggled with rumors about Bucky. When being Patrice, she also doesn’t have to be constantly wary of her alcoholic father, who was always “snarling, spitting, badgering, weeping, threatening her little brother Pockey, begging Patrice for a dollar, no, a quarter, no, a dime” (Louise, p. 12). Therefore, maybe it is embarrassing to say but she always believes that the name, Patrice, could “make her rise in the world” (Louise, p. 13). The renamed Patrice hopes to forget her past, which is a reconstruction of her identity that truly belongs to her. Through the awakening of female consciousness, Patrice deconstructs the “Pixie” of the past, develops her own sense of existence, and establishes the worldview that is truly due to her.

4.3 Millie Cloud—A Recorder of Racial Memory

Compared to Patrice, Millie does not play the main role in the book, but the design of this character has much significance. Millie Cloud is the daughter of Louise Pipestone and is the only person in this Chippewa tribe who has received higher education from White people. Millie, an Indian who has been assimilated by the White, still firmly defends her inner Indian identity. When others try to compliment her by saying “I never thought of you as an Indian”, she thinks it’s an insult because it’s ignoring and denying her racial identity.

Growing up in Minneapolis, Millie has never forgotten her roots and has a great interest in the historical traditions and survival status of the reservation. Her higher education background with her Native American identity destines her to become an objective and impartial recorder of the Chippewa traditions. She investigates the situation of the reservation through her own observations and records, hoping to learn more about her roots in order to better study and protect its original traditions and culture. She conducts long-term visits to the reservation to investigate the structure of the house, family population, and economic situation of the residents. She also attends Patrice’s father’s funeral and later records in details the songs and customs that appear in the Indian ceremony. Consequently, Millie’s survey can effectively overturn the government’s previous census that is used to convince Congress that the Turtle Mountain Reservation is prosperous, and the ultimate goal of the census is to occupy the land, further confiscating tribal autonomy and weakening their culture.

At the same time, Millie also plays the role of a typist; through retrospection she uses English as a carrier to rebuild a history that is once overlooked and forgotten, making people to reexamine the political

strategies and attempts to Native Americans in American history. As a result, the significance of the development in indigenous culture is worth pondering, and the unique views on survival, values, and the world can be reshaped. English, as the language of the hegemonic White society, is used by Millie to write and record the historical memories of the minority Native American tribes. She acts like an activator of cultural diversity, deconstructing the barriers between mainstream White culture and American Indian culture to achieve a harmonious integration of the two and making the marginalized culture to be fairly written in the mainstream language.

5. Conclusion

In the book, Erdrich depicts diverse female characters who demonstrate the merits of perseverance, bravery, and agility in resisting crises and difficulties. She affirms their values as they are indispensable in the collective struggle of the tribe against the intrigue of federal government. Through the reconstruction of the images of American Indian women, their status is highlighted. They are the inheritors of racial traditions and blood lineage, the disseminators of cultural knowledge, and the guardians of racial memories, playing a crucial role in the survival and future development of the reservation. Today, there are still a lot of missing and murdered Indian women who have been subjected to sexual trafficking, assault and harassment. Erdrich accentuates the crises and conditions of Indian women to better speak up for them and light up their path to freedom and equality.

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