

**CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES
AND INTERRELATIONS IN FAMILIES IN
*THE LAST REPORT ON THE MIRACLES***

Santosh Laxman Shinde

Assistant Professor,
Shri. R.R. Patil Mahavidyalaya,
Savalaj, Sangli

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore quest for ethnic identity in Louise Erdrich's famous novel entitled *The Last Report on the Miracles*. She redefines notions of cultural, social aspects as well as its importance to identity in her novels. Louise Erdrich is recognized as the heir to American Indian literature. She deals with identity within the context of colonization and evolving hybridization of distinct groups or peoples. *The Last Report on the Miracles* is a seminal text of Erdrich's writing. It presents a variety of notions of home, cultural and social aspects. All the character's ethnic identity differ, yet they all have one profound resemblance. They compete, intercede, backtrack, overlap, tangle, mix, and add and subtract elements that make their homes and place.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, cultural, social and interrelations in families, Native American literature

Introduction

In *The Last Report on the Miracles*, Natives negotiate the conflicting forces of Native and Western ideologies to ensure their cultural, social, and economic survival. As the once emotionally, physically, and culturally lost Lulu, Nanapush, and Fleur as adopted family members that, for Damien, seamlessly weave their way into his heart and religion. It is simply the reality that Natives are forced to deal with.

Notion of Ethnic identity, cultural, social and interrelations in families

This novel retains indigenous customs, culture, and lands. Reading 'Home' as the Catalytic Converter is one of the themes of Erdrich. Unlike its predecessor's *Tracks and Foul Souls*, the novel's major characters also desire to belong to a specific people or place. The protagonist of the novel is a non-Native. Erdrich tackles home concepts from a variety of viewpoints. It includes the lenses of a luminal existence, never purely Western or Native. Tribal concepts of home are then not relegated to Native Americans or defined by a specific number of Native or

Western elements. Home is characterized by the contact of these elements with each other at precisely the right moments.

In the *Last Report*, the Native American setting, that is, the reservation and Native community serve as the fertile ground from which Erdrich's protagonist, Damien/Agnes's, home grows and flourishes. Thus, Erdrich's tenets of home never change for either Natives or non-Natives; community, family, and their relation to location are still keys. It is only the connections between that particular location and elements. Father Damien Modest claims that Hearing sins was work that required all of the tactful knowledge developed during the years spent among these people. His people. He was proud to say he had been adopted into a certain family, the Nanapush family, whose long dead elder had been his first friend on the reservation. (LR5)

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse traces the investigation of Sister Leopolda's candidacy for sainthood; the story that transpires finds that Father Damien is more fitting for the honor, Damien's existence within the reservation hinges on incorporation and integration into the Native American community. Agnes is the orphaned people. The home on the reservation is paramount to survivals. Damien's direct involvement with the community also warrants the acknowledgment that she is instrumental in Native survival, both literally and culturally. Damien is not merely given a home; she becomes a crucial part of the community. Deirdre Keenan acknowledges in *Unrestricted Territory: Gender, Two Spirits*, and Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, 'this assertion immediately raises the question: 'How can a white Catholic missionary represent Native American tradition?''(4).

Written partly in epistolary form and partly as a reconfiguration of the oral tradition, the *Last Report* begins with an end. It tells the most private and most protected secret of Father Damien Modeste: he is a woman. While profound, Damien's secret is less important than his journey and struggle to keep the secret. Mimicking Native American's own voluntary and involuntary migration, assimilation, and eventual re-conception of home, Damien emerges without a fixed location to call home; she later becomes firmly established in the fold of the Native community. Searching for a place to belong, the former Agnes Dewitt is usurped by the identity Sister Cecilia.

However, the physical location of Little No Horse is itself only as important as the community and people. As Damien is quick to point out, comparing himself to Mary Kashpaw, his history is undeniably tied to the Native citizens of the community: the story of Mary Kashpaw existence is also my story here,' said father Damien. 'Her story and mine are twined up from the roots of the place. There is no telling my story without hers!' (55). As Erdrich concludes in an interview with Mark Rolo, 'I think there is a more pointed, political, Native identity in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*. But now it's more about identity in a sense that includes family, gender, sexual identity every kind of way that we label ourselves or attempt to root ourselves' (38). Damien and the Natives' combined concerns and struggles become the "roots" that unify to create a singular story of survival, assimilation, and communal identity.

The location of the reservation and the space of the characters' actions are neither fixed nor solid. 'The reservation at the time was a place still fluid of definition, appearing solid only on a map. It was a place of shifting allegiances, new feuds and old animosities, a place of clan teasing, jealousy, comfort, love' (LR75). It is a home in all aspects, but with boundaries that came and went, drawn to accommodate local ventures sawmills, farms, feed stores, and the trap

lines of various families' (LR 75). This is the place where Father Damien Modeste arrives and attempts to make sense of Native conditions and her own existence within the community.

In this context, 'Erdrich's novel provides a theory and practice of gender identity formations that challenges mainstream concepts and the intolerance that arises from those concepts' (Keenan 1). While Damien comes to realize that her arrival on the reservation is a new beginning, what memories remain of her former selves is not truly extinguished. She has to confront her evolving identity in order to attempt to define who or what she is. As Damien questions, 'Between this two female and male identities, where was the real self? It came to her that both Sister Cecilia and then Agnes were as heavily manufactured of gesture and pose as was Father Damien. In addition, what shifting of identity was she? (LR 76). In application to race construction, Louis Owens supports this notion, claiming that 'American Indian identity is also manufactured from the dominant hegemony's stereotypes' (4).

Therefore, the issue Nanapush and Fleur face are what colonization has forced them to become and what their memories tell them they still are. As Damien states, 'They were shells made of loss, made of transparent flint, made of the whispers in the oak leaves, voices of the dead' (LR 80). Yet, these dead still have voices, voices that carry on through Damien's memory and re-telling of the story. Home evolves in all of these fashions by utilizing what, in Momaday's terms, sustains them all: the word. It is here the story of creating place becomes paramount to creating or re-creating a literal place of communal identity for Damien, Nanapush, Fleur, and the Native community.

The challenge to save their land lives, and souls from Western intrusion, obstruction, and oppression are, however, extremely difficult in the context of colonization. As the epitome of colonial opportunism, John James Mauser uses the land and Indian people for purely economic gain. He went from land speculation into lumber, minerals, and quarries. He now purchases areas lost to the continual census that shows a dwindling number of Indians. He buys the land tax forfeited. He buys the land by having the Ojibwe owners declared incompetent. He buys this parcel and the next. He takes the trees off. He leaves the stumps. New Legislation passes is reversed. Mauser prospers with every fumble. His hands are always open, ready to receive. 'He denudes all holdings as they come his way, though sometimes he waits for certain special parcels that produce, as do one series of prime allotments on Little No Horse, oak trees of great density, beauty, and age that will never again be seen in this region' (LR 106).

The sentiment of communal unity and good is later reiterated by a perishing wife of Kashpaw, Quill. Pillagers and Lazarres should eat from the same kettle, Quill said, 'join together for strength against the truer threat which is not each other but the damn chimooks that are, Whites. Stay together, your families don't let the land and money that divide you' (LR 114). This statement is an obvious appeal to preserve traditional versions of a communal home, in both senses of cultural and location identity, Erdrich's choice to specify the Lazarres and Pillager clans is paramount to understanding that totally reverting to the old ways is impossible. The families and their perspective names have already been diluted by French interbreeding and influence. Colonization is unavoidable and irreversible. In Erdrich's terms, her characters are only left with 'protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of this catastrophe' (Where 23).

As Damien gathers up a shovel to aid Kashpaw's daughter, Mary's, mechanical and relentlessly digging into the ground of her Native home, he does not chastise her for her

seemingly abnormal actions; he joins her as an equal. Recollecting old Kashpaw's vision of impending death for his people, shuddering fear ran through Damien Was Kashpaw's daughter digging those two hundred Anishinaabeg graves. 'The holes were the shape not only of graves but worse, of many interconnected and searching graves' (LR 115). Reflecting his own placement with the Native community, Damien's actions literally make him the digger of graves but also solidly position Damien as a member of the Native community 'that the tall spirit wearing the black hat will return for' (LR 112).

In Father Damien's recollection, 'This killing hatred between mother and daughter was passed down and did not die when the last Pauline became a nun. As Sister Leopolda, she was known for her harsh and fearsome ways' (LR 157). Under the duress of her abusive mother and hers before her, Pauline is formed into one that sees no clear future for Natives, only the bleak existence of staving off the Church, disease, and starvation. Pauline then chooses to embrace Western ideals to secure her place in the new world. Denouncing her Native heritage, Pauline enters the convent for one purpose only: to become a saint. It is not a coincidence that sainthood is the most powerful position one could obtain within the church. Saints transcend all Church authority, as they are likened to Jesus himself. Unfortunately, even the Church cannot negate what Chadwick Allan deems blood memory. As Damien questions, 'What unknown capacities, what secret Old World cruelties, were thereby tangled into her simmering blood?' (LR 157). Pauline cannot escape her fate because she does not have any sustaining notion of home. Instead, she searches constantly for that familiar place to ground herself within the world of colonization (*Where* 23).

Damien works tirelessly to champion the physical and religious needs of the Native population. In doing so, he comes to redefine what is truly important for him, what he considers elements of his home: 'He described the piteous effects of the most recent illness. The ravage is of hunger. The moral effect of land loss and the deep thirst he had already experienced among 'the people a thirst for the spiritual drink, curiosity, a hunger for the food of the heart' (LR 180). Subsequently, 'this thirst is solidly tied to the native's vital relationship to the dirt and grass under feet' (LR 171). As Damien resides in the same physical location, this reality becomes true for him too. He finds that his desires, needs, and loves all exist within the Native family and community he calls home. Drawn immediately to Fleur's infant, Lulu, Father Damien becomes both a father and unbreakable part of a Native family. 'It was perhaps the imprint of the tiny body against his own, the connection that still lingered, a dreaminess, that caused him when he signed the certificate to add his own name, twice, mistakenly along with Nanapush, as both priest and father' (LR 184).

While the outcome of losing Nanapush and Pillager lands is the story of Four Souls, Damien's struggle to aid the Natives is equally as important as Fleur's later decision to leave home to exact her revenge on John James Mauser. As Four Souls pointedly shows, Fleur's decision is detrimental to her, even though she does win back her land. As her daughter, Lulu puts it, 'She chose revenge. I chose to hate her for it' (LR 242). On the other hand, Father Damien's resolution to stay put in order to serve the tribal community solidifies her position within the Native world, ironically making her actions more Indian than many of the native community consider Fleur's life with John James Mauser.

However, Damien discovers this identity and home is not one that comes without a price. Giving herself up for the good of the community is unfavorable to her in various ways. She

continually struggles with who she has been, who she is, and who she must become. Damien crosses both the boundaries of manhood and womanhood, which comes to a complicated and decisively destructive climax when Damien is sent an assistant: Damien's faith and allegiance to both place and community are shaken by the arrival and closeness of Father Gregory Wekkle. Having no other place to stay, Wekkle promptly moves into Damien's small abode. Fearing that her secret will be found out, Damien constructs a wall of books between them. As their attraction to each other increases, this wall becomes symbolic of what seems to be the words that they cannot say to each other. Reverting to her old identity, Erdrich shifts Damien into the female Agnes.

While emancipated from the tangled trials of the spirit world by her attendant, Mary, Damien's recovery only finds her still resolved to suicide. Here other members of her Native home retrieve her from another point of certain extermination. Damien's friend and confidant, 'Nanapush provides the traditions that can reconcile the priest's divided self' (Keenan 5). This is in stark contrast to 'the way Damien understood it; he was to help, assist, comfort and aid, spiritually sustain, and advise the Anishinaabeg' (LR 214). Yet, as Damien entered 'the familiar yard of Nanapush's home that afternoon, heart full, the pleasure and kindness in Nanapush's face somewhat eased his certainty of killing himself' (LR 214). As Melanie Wittmier concludes, 'Damien, who comes to the reservation to instruct the Ojibwe people in the beliefs and ethics of the Christian faith, finds himself learning from those he intended to instruct' (241). In a Native sweat lodge, chanting Catholic prayers, Damien discovers that 'he is indeed comforted, as he first believed he was to comfort the Natives' (LR 215).

Erdrich's further disintegrates the hierarchal binary of Western and Native religious beliefs. In a mix of Euro-American and Ojibwe religious practices and attitudes, Damien literally fills the church with serpents, who are attracted to his piano playing. This allows 'Natives such as Mary Kashpaw to enter the church to worship among the snakes unmolested, though with her kind' (LR 220). Biblically serpents are considered synonymous with evil, but in a tribal view, as Nanapush explains, 'the occurrence was a sign of great positive concern among the old people, for the snake was a deeply intelligent secretive being, and knew all the cold and blessed spirits who lived under stone and deep in the earth' (LR 220). Acknowledging the power of the animals and of this occurrence, 'the Native population consults Damien more often and trusted him with more intimate knowledge' (LR 220).

However, Leopolda's threat does not come to fruition. A compromise is struck for both of their benefits. Damien keeps the secret of her gender, and Leopolda continues as a lauded member of the convent. Here the novel's text becomes crucial to creating or defining home. The story of the *Last Report* is a testimony in which Leopolda's candidacy for sainthood is essentially re-written in order to include the tyranny, manipulation, underhandedness, and murderous actions of which she is guilty. This revision takes that necessary attribute of belonging to a people and place away from Leopolda, positioning her forever in a setting that tolerates her, but can never be the home she desires—she will never achieve sainthood. Father Jude's last report and Damien's letters to the Vatican make sure of this fact. Without both, Leopolda would be glorified as dedicated to the holy Church, its works, and its people she would be saintly.

Damien's own life is placed in much the same context. Without the oral history, he gives Father Jude, Damien would have been simply remembered as a priest who had done his duty

converting and hearing confessions by the ignorant horde of Natives where he is posted. Instead, as Father Jude concludes, Damien's lives 'The life of sacrifice, the life of ordinary acts of daily kindness, the life of devotion, humility, and purpose including miracles and direct shows of God's love, gifts of the spirit, humorous incidents as well as tragic encounters and examples of heroic virtue are Saintly' (LR 341). In addition, 'in an added bit of irony, the text of Lulu's birth certificate convinces Father Jude that Damien is none other than Lulu's biological father' (LR 333). In these cases, Father Jude's report and Lulu's birth certificate, Damien is given more than what could be achieved by merely a woman posing as a priest. The texts make Damien a real priest, a real father, one that is respected and loved within the community where she creates a home. In Jace Weaver's terms, the lives of Leopolda and Damien both continue to live on because of the stories told.

Thus, Damien becomes an actual part of the land he so loved. On the other hand, during Leopolda's life, her fanatically violent and painful penances draw rebuke from her mother superior, and by the end of her existence, Leopolda's temperament and actions socially ostracize her from the ranks of the convent, positioning her again as an outsider in a space she wishes to belong. The implications of her death are then less shocking or surreal than the actual event: Leopolda has a heart-attack when Jack Mauser, who is at the time disguised as a statue of the Virgin Mary, hands her a bouquet of sweet honeysuckle. However, Leopolda's body is not given last rites in consecrated ground. Her body is vaporized by lightning in *Tales of Burning Love*. Thus, she seems doomed to an afterlife undefined by either Western or Native beliefs. Therefore, Leopolda's choices and actions alienate herself from both her Native culture and the Church, while Damien embraces his hybrid position to become one with both the Native community and church. The outcome of Damien and Leopolda's deaths is then earned or deserved through their contrasting works within the Native community and Church.

However, Damien's death scene emphasis on positive hybridity is final. The *Last Report* moves to conventional and unconventional endnotes, where Louise Erdrich gives acknowledgments and thanks to people and places instrumental in aiding in her creation of the *Last Report* on the Miracles at Little No Horse. Here she also mentions that 'the reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations' (LR 357). Yet, the word 'imagined' should not be read as synonymous with false. Ines Hernandez-Avila claims, 'the power of the creative writing process itself, the inscription of our lives and our communities' lives, the relocating of our languages in the homes of our words, and our homes in the words of our languages' (493). Consistent with this assessment,

Erdrich ends the *Last Report* by blending language, fiction, and reality into a place i.e. a home, which does not distinguish each space as an individual location. As always, Nanapush gets the last word. He ends the narrative of the *Last Report* by acknowledging the power words have to create and define a home's place for all peoples. He states: If we call ourselves and all we see around us by the original names, will we not continue to be Anishinaabeg? Instead of reconstituted white men, instead of Indian ghosts? So the rocks here know us, do the trees, do the waters of the lakes? Not unless they are addressed by the names, they themselves told us to call them in our dreams (LR 361).

While this statement supports Chadwick Alien's argument for blood memory, the lines are also imperative to understanding that home can exist in dreams. This argument is akin to John

Gamber's contentions in *Dreamers in the Cities*, but for my objective, it is more important to realize that, despite actual location, language, the land, people, community, and culture are interdependent on one another for definition. As Nanapush makes clear that 'unless the earth is called by the names it gave us humans, won't it cease to love us? And is not it true that if the earth stops loving us, everyone, not just the Anishinaabeg, will cease to exist' (LR 361). The word 'human' not Native or Westerner includes all people, such as characters like Father Damien and Sister Leopolda. Only the remembering, the telling, the re-telling of the stories is responsible for the continuation of all people.

Conclusion

All the character's identity differs, yet they all have one profound similarity. They compete, intercede, backtrack, overlap, tangle, mix, and add and subtract elements that make their homes. For Erdrich', home does not conform to traditional Native or Western definitions. It is created through selected attributes of community, language, family, land, past and present. These additions, omissions, and intermingling elements are difficult, painfully, comfotingly, and even humorously fit together. Home's construction is always artful and always definite. On a larger level, the tenets of the home act in a similar way. The inter-relation and connection of each person to culture, custom, family, community, and location is significant to re-creating of defining home for indigenous populations, who at times, can only count on the absence of these elements to define them. The novel *The Last Report on the Miracles*, thus explores the struggle for ethnic identity as depicted in the characters' multiple reactions to the notions of place in general and of a home in particular.

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