

The Game of Silence: An Embodiment of a Covert Culture

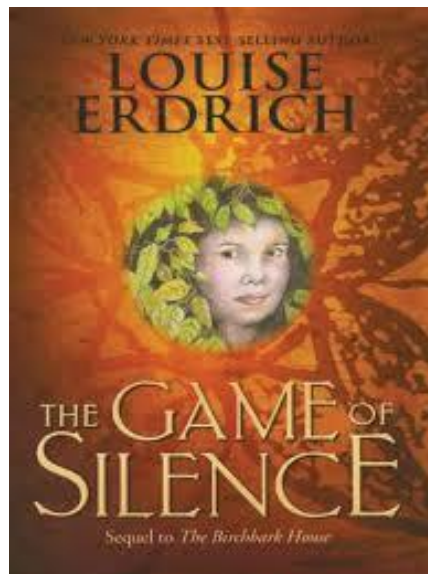
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Abstract

The well acclaimed Native American author Louise Erdrich, in her Birchbark House series, a children book series, presents the untold history of her Ojibwe clan. She started writing the series when she and her mother were researching on their family and Ojibwe history. The series consists of five books starting with the Birchbark House (1999), followed by The Game of Silence (2005) and three more novels. The novel The Game of Silence is a story of the loss of hereditary land of Ojibwe to the lies of the white settlers. Children books by Erdrich, unlike her adult fiction, portray the history of Ojibwe, their language, their everyday living along with their hopes, fears and crises. She presents a picture of life untouched by the processes of colonization. The novel offers a Native American view of the culture prevalent in the 1850s Minnesota region of America. The Ojibwe people of the novel mingle with the white settlers calmly. The natives in the novel are not barbarians or brutal people as depicted in the classic American fictions. Erdrich display a secret culture of America which was hidden by the whitewashing of history in the works white authors.

Keywords: *Birchbark House, Ojibwe, Whites, Omakayas, cultural change, Dakota*



Every culture is a way of life of a group of people living at a particular point of time. It embodies behaviors, values, language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, and works of art and so on. A study on cultures nourishes the knowledge about the happening in society. Cultural Studies research often focuses on how particular phenomena relates to matter of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class and gender. The melting-pot culture of America is the result of many forms of ethno-convergence that took place in the

history of America. It is not merely the result of acculturation or deculturation, rather it merges these two concepts and creates some new cultural phenomena called neoculturation.

As twenty-first century approached with a hike in the number of literary works produced by Native American authors, there generated an importance on the cultural awareness of children of contemporary American schools and colleges. Recently, many American school curriculums include the works of Native American authors, as a way to provide multicultural education to the students. This helps the students to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes required for living in a pluralist society. To understand American Indian literatures, it is important to have an awareness of the diversity of people in the Western Hemisphere. The multi-cultural America has different cultures and customs prevalent to different place and point of time. Children literature is the best source of education to children. Many schools and curriculums focus on educating children with the help of fiction, stories and poems. Literary works that depict children as protagonists provide students with the idea that they are also important as the adults are. Story telling is a part of livelihood for Native Americans. A Native American child learns his life lessons from the stories told by his elders. Native American writers use story telling techniques in their fictions as a primary form of educating younger generations. Such works that represent distinct language groups comprised of particular cultures and geographic varieties arouse curiosity in the minds of children.

Louise Erdrich, an Ojibwe native author, was inspired to write the novel series when she and her mother were researching on their family history. They found the hidden truths in history, which are untold in the United States history books. They found out the hidden accounts of colonization and its effect on Ojibwe tribe. The books she has written for children provide valuable, first-order understanding of Ojibwe life before the onslaught of white autonomy. In her Birchbark House series, she vividly captures the everyday life, language, customs and beliefs of Ojibwe in the nineteenth century. The series tells the history of Ojibwe through the life of Omakayas, the protagonist of the series. Being a mother of three daughters, she picks an Ojibwe girl as her protagonist to present the importance of females in the matriarchal Ojibwe clan. Erdrich presents the Minnesota region of America in 1800s in the series. Minnesota was the homeland of Ojibwe until the westward movement.

The colonization of American land was a three-pronged process. Firstly, the tribal people were devastated by various communicable diseases. Then, they were attacked culturally through language, religion and customs. Lastly, they were over powered by the U.S government with its policies, laws and politics. The tribes relied on land for their living and as the white encroached land parcel by parcel, the tribal way of living changed. They couldn't find a living by hunting and gathering and they were forced to live a capitalist life. Erdrich's style in her children books vary drastically from her adult fiction. Her use of Ojibwe language offers a monumental learning moment for children. She provides a glossary of Ojibwe words and provides phonetic translation of each Ojibwe word. Since Ojibwe is an oral language, this helps in preserving the language. Thus, keeping the language and the culture alive.

The second book of the series *The Game of Silence* (2005) is set in 1850s, when the protagonist Omakayas is nine years old. The novel presents the traumatic consequences of colonization on the Ojibwe tribe of Minnesota. Omakayas, her family, along with friends and fellow clan members are forced to leave their homeland. The land they lived was everything for them. Omakayas couldn't believe the notion of owning a land. She exclaims "Who questions the earth, the ground beneath your feet? They had always accepted it – always here, always solid. That something was home" (*The Game of Silence* 19).

The novel depicts the everyday life of Ojibwe in Minnesota; their myths and customs; the mingling with white settlers; the cultural and material changes that came with their relations with white settlers and so on. The novel was exalted by Publisher's Weekly as a book that

offers a view of America's past that are rarely found in history books. Natives of America in the works of Whites were barbaric, brutal, merciless wild men of the forests. But Erdrich's version of life among Anishinabeg is that everyone gets along. They accept new comers, share the resources with them, and mingle with them. They lived in harmony with their neighboring tribes such as the Bwaanag or the Dakota people and treated the white settlers with kindness; and accepted the differences in their ways of living. Erdrich depicts a trans-cultural society of 1850s in her novel where the Ojibwe lived in rapport with the whites and the Dakota people.

The novel starts with the arrival of a group of shabby destitute Ojibwe people, who were driven from their homeland by the whites and was attacked by the Dakota people when they tried to settle in the land promised by the whites. The land which was in the west of Ojibwe tribes were those of the Dakota people and when these men tried to settle there they feared the loss of their land and they attacked them for their own survival. Deyday, Omakayas's father explains the differences occurred after the settlement of whites "There was a time when we had no quarrel with the Bwaanag.... They lived in their part of the world and we in ours. We even traded with them. But as the chimookamang push us, so we push the Bwaanag. We are caught between two packs of wolves" (21). Even though they were cheated, they believed in the words of the whites and sends men in all four directions to know whether any tribe has broken the treaties with whites that they are so angry to punish the Ojibwe like this.

The novel depicts the everyday life of Ojibwe. For them time is not linear but circular. Everything repeats. The novel starts with summer (Neebin) and ends in summer. Erdrich depicts this circular notion of time when she says "By the time the earth warms again"(27). They always engaged in particular jobs at particular points of time. When Omakayas questions Angeline of the piled garbage near the Whites settlement, she answers "It's because they live in the same place all the time" (131). Omakayas compares this with her family. In spring, they moved to the maple sugar camp and to their birchbark house; in summer, to fish camp, berry-picking camp and to a ricing camp; and in winter, to the cedar tree house in LaPointe.

The domination of whites in the land of Ojibwe, changed the Ojibwe way of living. These cultural changes include changes in foods consumed, housing, religious practices, clothing, trade, kinship and so on. Erdrich presents the Ojibwe life untouched by colonialism. It depicts a time when Ojibwe even after their mingling with the whites followed their ways of living. She carefully pictures the unexplored life of Ojibwe. They maintained a cycle in everything they did. In summer, they caught fish from the lake, gutted and boned it, dried the fish for future use and prepared fish soup. They collected rice from a ricing camp. In fall, they collected medicinal plants and herbs for the coming year. Prepared sweat lodges and weaved blankets for winter. In winter, they stayed in their homes and when they find a day with sunrise they try to get some small game like snares around their home. Though the life in winter is so hard they all hope for the glorious spring that follows and gathers as many as food for their living in spring. But the Whites always settled in the same home all the years. They domesticated animals like cows, pigs, sheep and chickens. It was disgusting for Omakayas to know that the Whites milked the cow and drank its milk. Ojibwe never domesticated any animals other than dogs.

Trade has been developing since the first treaty with the Whites. A section in the novel portrays the trading market of Minnesota in the nineteenth century. Angeline and Omakayas goes there to sell the fish they dried together. They traded it with the white trader. With the money they got they bought new cloth to weave a new dress for Omakayas, beads, velvet cloth, tobacco, licorice candy, and, a bell. Since Angeline studied in the missionary run school in LaPointe, she could read the number written by the trader and could bargain for more money.

Language is the main difference between Ojibwe and the Whites. Though Omakayas and Clarissa are good friends they convey their ideas through sign language. In the opening

pages of the novel, Omakayas couldn't pronounce Clarissa's name and vice-versa. During winter, Omakayas and Angeline goes to school and Omakayas could now pronounce Clarissa's name correctly. Though Deydey hated the white alphabets and numbers he wanted his children to learn it and find out the secrets of White men and their treaties. The teaching of English language to tribal children by force was a way of Whites to get mingled with them for their own benefits- similar to the way as they did with us Indians. Father Baraga, a historic figure in the history of America is a character in the novel and he tells Omakayas that he is trying to write down Ojibwe language. Since Ojibwe is an oral language Omakayas and her family is excited to learn writing it. But the Father demands them to be converted to Christianity in order to study the transcribed script which the family wisely avoids. The novel portrays Omakayas family giving much importance to their Ojibwe religious customs. When Deydey guides the Father to the far-point people they are trapped in the floating ice which causes a fight between them on the superiority of each other's religious beliefs. Ojibwe believed in spirits as their caretakers while Father believed in Jesus. Deydey argues with him "It was my spirits who answered my prayers... And the sail I made out of my blanket ...My spirits live around here... Mine is the real one, and the most powerful" (220). Thus, Erdrich presents an Ojibwe family proud of their own tribal heritage instead of being changed to White customs for the benefits they may get from it.

Omakayas knew that the whites were the source of many good things as well as well as the source of various terrible things too. The Ojibwe knew that the whites introduced kettles, warm blankets and ribbons, but they also brought sickness which wiped out about twelve percent of the tribal population. The white settlers depicted in the novel include Father Baraga and Clarissa. Nokomis explains the mingling of Ojibwe with the whites to Omakayas,

The chimookomanag we see here are only the first drop of rain. A storm of them lives past the sunrise, in the east. They can flood us like a river.... We have seen what happens to others when they resist, go to war. The river wipes them out. Our way is different. We have always found out how to live with them, work with them, trade with them, even to marry them! (30)

The first to be mentioned is Clarissa, the 'Break-Apart Girl' to Twilight, Angeline and Omakayas. She was a typical Victorian girl. She lived in the Whit settlement area in house build of rocks. Her dress denotes the Victorian culture. Erdrich says that the "dress nearly cut her in half.... That is why they had named her the Break-Apart Girl" (46). She wore skirt with shiny fabric, with red and white stripes. Her dress and her shoes seems to be painful for her. She can never run with the shoes and Omakayas pities at the paleness of her feet. She likes Omakayas and her friends that she brings apple for them. She enjoyed their company. She played piano as a typical Victorian woman. Though she belongs to this culture she mingles with Omakayas and her family as an acquaintance and tries her best to communicate with her through sign language. In the last chapter when Omakayas and her family are leaving their land Clarissa promises to take care of her dog Makataywazi, and gifts her a piece of cloth with both of their names weaved together.

Father Baraga is a missionary settled in Minnesota with the idea of converting the Ojibwe into Christians. Father Baraga and Deydey are friends and Father never leaves a situation to lure Deydey and his family into Christianity. The conversion of tribal people from pagans to Christians was one among the first ways to seduce tribal people into the words of the whites. Though he succeeded in converting many tribes into it, he couldn't convert Deydey and his family members. Omakayas' family had strong beliefs in their spirits and they offered tobacco to their spirits for every happiness they found in their life.

The general view in the United States is still that the Indians committed more inhuman than did the Whites. Since it is impossible to find satisfactory evidences for this, it can never be

proved. But a single instance of White atrocities against Indians, such as the forced removal of tribes from their land or the Sandy Lake tragedy depicted in the novel is enough to make the point that Whites hands are not clean in this respect. Erdrich presents the unknown history of Ojibwe in her novel with utmost sincerity and she tells the reader to enjoy the book as much as she enjoyed writing it. She took long time in writing these books because they portray the truest sense of Ojibwe. The cultural differences and mingling of Whites and tribes are never written in any history books and hence her books are most valuable part of history as well.

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Reference

[1] Erdrich, Louise. *The Game of Silence*. New York. Harper Collins Publishers (2005)

Biosketch



R. Radhika is an M.Phil Research Scholar of the prestigious Annamalai University, Chidambaram. Being a keen observer and an efficient scholar, she has presented more than ten scholarly papers in National and International Conferences. She focuses on Cultural Studies centralizing on the works of Native American Writers.