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American Indian Ideologies in *The Round House*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the ideologies in the Native American context as represented in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*. In this paper, I intend to examine the connection between the change in the belief system and its effects on the socio-cultural practices of indigenous communities. I argue that behind the ethical crisis and change in indigenous ideologies, these elements play the key roles: the imposition of foreign values in the interest of colonial authority, intercultural interactions, and the rise of individualism due to the loss of indigenous cultural memory. One of the key elements that keep the indigenous ideologies alive is folklore. Traditionally, the indigenous folklores work as effective means to circulate the ideologies that shape the lifestyle of the Native American people. However, due to the external influences, the story listening culture has declined, and its impact surfaces as ecological crisis and changes in their way of living. The consequences of the ethical crisis manifest in the key principles that guide the tribal lifestyle. For instance, ecological sustainability, collective responsibility, and social welfare influence the shifting belief system that promotes individualism, materialistic gain, and competitiveness. Similarly, colonial intervention promotes capitalism by exploiting natural resources and adopting other unethical means. To testify to my assumption, the ethical degeneration in the Native American society as the effect of the loss of indigenous ideological impact, I have examined *The Round House* and the folklores narrated within it.

Keywords: ideologies, indigenous, colonialism, Ojibwe-culture, folklores, windigoo

American Indian Ideologies in *The Round House*

I intend to study the relationship between the Native American ideologies and the socio-cultural practices in the Native American societies, as Louise Erdrich (2012) presents in *The Round House*. I argue that the ideologies of the Native American people play key roles in shaping the relations between humans and nature. The sense of collective responsibilities of the indigenous people comes from the view that all living beings share connectivity. Therefore, these people are ecologically sensitive and try to maintain their balance. As depicted in *The Round House*, the indigenous ideologies lose their grip on the new generations as they come in contact with the colonial ideologies and intercultural interactions occur. So, the indigenous people have seen a radical shift in the socio-cultural organization. Some unwanted changes surface among themselves and their relationship with the environment. Such changes reveal the changing belief system.

In *The Round House*, Erdrich (2012) attempts to represent the context of the North Dakota Reservation of the Native American families. She offers the narrative perspective of Joe, a boy from an American Indian family. The narrative foregrounds the problem of the rape of Joe's mother, who works as a clerk entrusted with the responsibilities of collecting the genealogical data of the Native American families on the reservation. Through Joe's mother's problem, the author exposes the challenges Native people have to face in the context of the increasing presence of external forces in the indigenous societies. The long-held beliefs of the Natives undergo erosion due to the pressure of the new socio-political organization regulated by the federal laws.

Circulation of Ideologies through the Indigenous Folklores

Erdrich (2012) projects the contrasting situations in the Indian reservations focusing on the times of the 1880s and much earlier than that with the help of

indigenous folklore. She juxtaposes the distinct cultural values by shifting the narrative positions. In Joe's narrative that concentrates on seeking justice for his mother, other metanarratives of folklore are embedded, which offer glimpses of the ancestral world of the Native American and their relation with the natural world. For instance, Mooshum, an indigenous old man, narrates the tales in his sleep. Joe observes that Mooshum rises during his sleep and unconsciously lets the story flow.

Though unconsciously delivered, Mooshum's narratives make sense. These narratives reveal how the indigenous people interpreted the interconnection between the events. By learning from the traumas caused by unethical living, they would try to uphold the ethical principles. Joe enjoys these stories. Especially, long folklore about Akiikwe, the Earth woman, who turns into windigoo, captures the human-nature relationship of earlier times. As per Mooshum's interpretation, during the famine, a person may be possessed by the spirit of wiindigoo as Akiikwe does. She preys on humans as a cannibal during the scarcity of food. This rise of the cannibalistic spirit is connected with the disruption of the ecological balance. As food becomes scarce, the native people face the hard times for survival. The reckless hunting by the colonizers dwindles the number of animals. Similarly, the agro-products do not get a supportive environment during the harsh winter.

Consequently, chaos prevails. It invites the possibility of a human turning into an instinctual beast, wiindigoo. Akiikwe-story holds the warning message to the indigenous people to use their wisdom to balance the ecological chain to minimize the possibility of windigoo spirit's rise. Jacob Bender and Lydia Maunz-Breese (2018), in their "Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*, the Wiindigoo, and Star Trek: The Next Generation," view, "The wiindigoo provides a potent metaphor for contextualizing and cautioning against self-indulgence, selfishness,

and similar behavior that threatens the harmony of the community. . . The Wiindigoo, then, is a personification of the very form of violence that threatens to consume communities whole” (p.147). As Bender and Breese view, Wiindigoo spirit is against the community's welfare since it manifests the brutal act of murder of its own people. It means an individual holds the possibilities for both constructive as well as destructive acts depending on which side of energy is invoked. Wiindigoo is the dark side of selfish indulgence that tries to satisfy its appetite at the cost of social welfare.

In the context of Joe’s present society, the wiindigoo spirit manifests the act of violence and exploitation. For instance, Linden lark, the white man, rapes Joe’s mother and intends to murder her along with another woman, Mayla, whom he loves but fails to get in return. This brutal action of Lark can be interpreted as possessing an evil spirit that harms others. So, Lark is a symbolic figure who undergoes ethical degeneration as his evil spirit rises. This illustrates how the indigenous folklores guide its people to take precautions against the possible violence from the fellow human beings who become wiindigoo-like.

Like Akiikwe-story, Mooshum tells the narrative about liver-eating Johnson, who comes from a white racial background and hunts the native American people for flesh. Johnson is another cannibal possessed by the wiindigoo spirit. Like Linden Lark, he perpetrates violence against the natives. In these stories, the choice of the White characters to commit violence against the indigenous does not seem to be merely a coincidence but rather a purposeful depiction of the colonial incursion of the European Whites into the Native American Societies. The projection of the invader as the evil expresses the hatred of the natives. The invasion invites the confrontation between the indigenous and the intruder. For instance, Joe’s quest for justice for his mother makes him commit to punishing Linden Lark. As the Federal Judiciary fails to give justice to

the native victim, Joe pursues it by revoking the tribal legacy of destroying the evil spirit to protect community members. Based on this principle, Joe attempts to justify his revenge of killing Linden Lark. In this case, the white man commits a crime against the Indian woman but goes unpunished by the federal laws. This shows which force operates to disrupt the social peace of the indigenous people. These people have to fight the invader to restore peace, as Joe does. As the native people lose their trust in the federal system's legal practices due to the discriminatory regulation, the victim, like Joe, resolves to seek justice through his own efforts.

The folklores circulating among the Native Americans pass the ideologies to the new generations. About ideology, Terry Eagleton, in his text, *Ideology: An Introduction*, views that ideology refers to the ways signs, meanings, and values maintain social power (p. 221). In the Native American context, the impact of old ideologies is less intense on the later generations due to their interaction with different cultures and the new political organization. Yet, in some ways, the new generations also live in their cultural ideologies. For instance, in *The Round House*, Joe narrates that his mother painted the wall yellow during her pregnancy “because it would be right for either a girl or boy, but halfway through the painting, she knew I was a boy. She knew because each time she worked in the room, a crane flew by the window, my father’s doodem, as I have said” (p. 459). Joe’s mother finds the connection between a Crane flying by the window and the birth of her son, Joe. She seems to have upheld the belief of the tribal society.

Colonial Incursion and Indigenous Cultural Erosion

Erdrich portrays the picture of how colonization causes social unrest and cultural erosion. The tribal people face critical times as they struggle to preserve the cultural heritage that shapes their practices. The outsiders invade the places they regard as the sacred sites of ceremonies. For instance, the sacred site, the

Round House, which symbolically stands to protect the Ojibwe American Indians, is used by the non-Indian, Linden Lark, as a site of rape and the attempted murder of two women. He feels no guilt but instead declares, “I have no fear. Things are the wrong way around, . . . The strong should rule the weak. Instead of the weak, the strong! It is the weak who pull down the strong. But I won’t get caught. (p.504). In the context of disclosing Linden’s crime, Joe’s mother reveals that Linden hates the Indians since they confront the white colonialists. Linden’s crime is just one example of violence committed against the natives. The assault is both physical as well as cultural. Therefore, the colonial incursion leaves a deeper impact on the social organization as it threatens cultural values.

Another serious problem is injustice since the perpetrator, Linden openly defies the laws. In addition, the Federal law does not punish him as the US legal system operates in a complex way if the case is related to the natives as the victim and the perpetrator is the non-Indian. Julie Tharp argues, “Indeed the legislation makes it difficult to protect all Native people from crimes committed against them by non-Indians, but the complication arising from combined sexism and racism make it even less likely that crimes against Native women will be tried” (“Erdrich’s Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*”, p. 26). The impunity exposes how the Native Americans remain as ‘other’ in the eyes of the Federal laws. To address this problem, the natives have to invoke the traditional justice system. Ideologically they view that the evil force that commits the crime must be destroyed to safeguard the peace of the community. For instance, Joe examines the failure of the government legal system to give justice to his mother. Therefore, he makes his own mission to destroy the culprit, Linden. Finally, he succeeds in getting justice his way. Joe builds his confidence for this mission, deriving insight from indigenous folklore. He attempts to justify his action against the criminal though he does not directly take responsibility for Lark's death. To his father, he

expresses, “Dead? I wanted him dead, okay? . . . I’m happy. He deserved it. Mom is free now. You’re free. The guy who killed him should get a medal” (p. 920). With the support of the tribal belief, Joe justifies the destruction of evil for the sake of good. In the case of his mother, he can destroy the wiindigoo-evil, Lark. Through the issue of Geraldine, Joe’s mother, the author portrays the complicated legal system of the USA, where the natives, like Joe’s family, face legal hurdles to get justice since violence committed by the whites against the Natives is hardly punished. To support this, it is relevant to mention Erdrich's citation regarding the Amnesty International report, which states that eighty-six percent of sexual crimes against Native women are committed by non-native men. However, only a few are punished. (*The Round House*, p.1004). Such scenarios invite the intervention of the tribal judicial practices so that the perpetrators do not escape justice. Therefore, as Joe views it, the killing of Linden Lark fulfills the requirements of old indigenous law.

Ojibwe Culture: Ethics of Human-Nature Relationship

Ojibwe culture respects ecological principles as it stresses the ethical use of resources to maintain ecological balance. Mythically, the Round House narrative survives as an epitome of Ojibwe culture. According to the Ojibwe old man, Mooshum, the Round House represents the buffalo woman who protects Nanapush by allowing him to destroy her body so that he can survive by eating her flesh and taking shelter inside her body against the snow. The buffalo woman leaves her body, but her spirit lives. This spirit instructs Nanapush to build a Round House that represents the buffalo herself that protects him and his relatives during the starvation as they get the flesh of this buffalo. Like the buffalo woman, the Round House, as prophesied by her spirit, shall protect Ojibwe Clan. Following this ideology, the tribal people sanctify this place and gather under its roof to perform ceremonies.

Another key aspect of Buffalo woman's narrative is the human-animal relationship. Her spirit narrates the history of the man-animal relationship in tribal societies. It is the relationship of sustainability and spiritual connectivity between humans and animals. Based on this principle, animals were hunted as per their needs. The practices of the tribal laws respected the natural laws. For instance, the Buffalo woman says that once there were adequate buffaloes to hunt for the tribal people. However, due to the violation of the hunting laws, the number of buffalo dwindle. They become scarce.

Which elements work to cause such imbalance? As illustrated in The Round House, external interferences play the role primarily. The colonial invasion can be held accountable to a great extent. With capitalistic interest, the invaders slaughter the animals in mass. Consequently, starvation prevails in the hunting communities. So, colonial capitalism damages the indigenous belief system since it imposes its values on the tribal communities. The colonizers' reckless exploitation of resources in the name of development and civilization in the wilderness drastically harms sustainability. To illustrate this, Erdrich (2012) writes, "The United States is forty-seven years old, and the entire country is based on grabbing Indian land as quickly as possible in as many ways as can be humanly devised" (p.717). Such incursion destabilizes the relatively stable socio-cultural organization of indigenous people. Therefore, the deeper impact of assault surfaces in the multiple sectors, like change in cultural practices, loss of animals and plants, division of land for individual ownership, and the pollution of rivers. The new laws and the outer culture both contribute to the change in human-nature relationships regarding the indigenous lifestyle.

The politically motivated implementation of European ideology over the indigenous people attempts to suppress their values. With the help of modern technology and knowledge, the outsiders belittle the tribal practices. For example,

the narrator presents the colonial perception, “We savages living off the forest, and to leave our land to us was to leave it useless wilderness, that our character and religion is of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy and on and on” (p.720). The intruders fail to understand the native religions and their connection with the material practices of life, or possibly, they deliberately denigrate the spiritual values of the indigenous people. For instance, the respect for animals and plant species by the natives is deep-rooted in their beliefs. Accordingly, their actions are oriented. It is like, Louis Althusser’s (2001) ideas about the relationship between ideologies and actions. For him, “the ‘ideas of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions”. (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p.1501). The American Indians, like other indigenous people, live in ideologies consciously or unconsciously through the cultural practices. This way, they make sense in real life.

The Ojibwe tribal people respect animals. They associate animals with spirits and take them as their clans. Therefore, animals are an integral part of their lives. Erdrich (2012) writes, “People were parts of these clans and were thus governed by a special relationship with one another and with animals” (p. 479). The Indian folklores presented in *The Round House* narrate the events of animals saving human beings. For instance, the infants whose parents die are nursed by the wolves. Likewise, Erdrich (2012) brings the allusion to Arion’s story. Arion of Methymna was a famous harp player who invented dithyrambic measure. Once, he decided to go to Corinth. For this purpose, he hired a boat that Corinthians used. He trusted them, but they betrayed him since they wanted to take his wealth into their possession by drowning him into the sea. However, Arion persuaded them that he would play his harp then they could do as they wished. The power of his music could not change their decision. Therefore, he

had to jump into the sea. As he was about to drown, a dolphin rescued him and left him at Taenarum. Like Arion, in another story, a girl was saved by a big turtle in the sea where she was struggling for life due to the exhaustion of swimming to reach her homeland. These narratives reflect the harmonious relationship between animals and humans in American Indian societies. These people accept the coexistence and interdependency between humans and animals. So, they respect the principle of sustainability. However, in modern times, the animal world is taken for commodification to earn due to the capitalistic mode of the economy. *The Round House* depicts it as an impact on the colonial economy.

The ideologies of the American Indians program the new generations to respect the elements of nature. They spiritually perceive them. For them, folklores are the effective means to circulate ideologies. Through the folklores, they reinforce that a body dies, but its spirit survives. For instance, in the context of *The Round House*, after the dissolution of her body, as the buffalo woman offers it to Nanapush, her spirit speaks to him. She not only saves the starving Ojibwe people but also suggests ways to build a roundhouse as the symbol of a buffalo woman's body that protects the natives. Here, the body's material aspect connects to spirituality since the spirits of the dead forefathers continue to guide and protect the living tribal people. Therefore, they associate themselves with animals as clans. For example, Joe's mother's clan is a turtle. These long-held beliefs face the challenges in the changing situations driven by intercultural negotiations and exposure to imperial politics.

Ethics plays a key role in guiding indigenous communities. It guides the need-based consumption of natural resources, which follows the principle of sustainability. They do not kill the animals to earn money as the capitalists do. Instead, use animals for survival. In the context of the 1880s, as represented in *The Round House*, this principle was violated due to the external invasion.

Therefore, most of the animals have disappeared. The narrator reveals, “Some old men said the buffalo disappeared into a hole in the earth. Other people had seen white men shoot thousands of train cars and leave them to rot (p. 581). Mooshum narrates that in Akiikwe-folklore, Nanapush driven by hunger and counseled by the spirit of the dead rabbit sets out in search of an old buffalo since others have been killed. The drastic loss of buffaloes indicates that erosion occurs in human-animal relations maintained by the indigenous ideologies. The white men slaughtering thousands of buffaloes violates the traditional tribal laws of hunting that are sensitive to ecological balance. What is the purpose of the mass slaughtering of buffaloes? Do the white need them for consumption or for what? It shows how reckless and insensitive they are about ecological sustainability.

Women hold respectable positions in Native American society. They get regarded as the source of nourishment and protection. It is reflected in the ways they organize their families. For them, it is no surprise that women work as the head of the family. Matrilineal traditions are common in indigenous communities. To cite from the story of Akiikwe, the buffalo woman sacrifices her body for the survival of starving people. Nanapush sings to make her hear; she follows it to be hunted. He attacks her and makes his way into her body for protection from the snow. He “crawled into the carcass. Once there, he swooned at the sudden comfort. . . And while unconscious, he became a buffalo. This buffalo adopted Nanapush and told him all she knew” (p.585). Here, the role of the female buffalo spirit as the savior can be associated with indigenous women who play the protective role by preparing food and caring for children, the sick, and the elderly. For example, Joe’s mother and grandma Thunder pay particular focus on offering delicious food. Erdrich projects the images of food repeatedly in the narrative to foreground this nourishing aspect. She seems to value the ethics of respecting those who offer food as a significant feature of the Native American society. In

contrast to the respect given to females of both humans and nonhumans in the tribal societies, the non-Indians assault the tribal women since they are raped and sexually abused. So, Native American culture values women as the source of life and love, but outsiders fail to understand these values and limit them in terms of sexual relations.

Interconnection between the Material and the Spiritual Spheres

The American Indian belief system connects material with spiritual. They stress the balance between these realms for the ideal society. They believe that the dead person's spirit manifests in various forms based on his/her deeds while alive. For instance, Mooshum interprets the appearance of the ghost as “Someone’s throwing their spirit at you” (p. 414). However, the ghost does not always appear to harm or signal a negative message. It may have a positive message too. For example, a ghost appears to Joe. So, he enquires about its possible indication to Mooshum. Mooshum hints at the possible luck to unfold, and Joe feels, “I was getting impatient for the luck to show itself” (p. 417). Later, he gets a doll full of money floating in the lake where Mayla’s car disappeared along with herself, an act perpetrated by Linden Lark. These instances reveal that the long-held belief in ghosts exists among the Native Americans. For them, it indicates the past relations and actions and possible future occurrences, like in the case of Joe. For the non-Natives, such belief may seem to be superstitious due to the ignorance of the natives. However, this belief has a meaningful role in alerting the Natives about their actions and possible consequences. It serves as a way to hold the people accountable for their actions and relations with the living beings. So, the spirits have a meaningful role in guiding the indigenous communities.

To cure the physical and mental ailments, the American indigenous people blend material and spiritual practices. Rather than isolating the material from the spiritual realm as modern medicine does for the treatment, they seek the solution

through the integration of material and spiritual. For the psychic treatment, they use spells and make offerings to Gods. Sometimes, they get a positive result. For example, Joe says, “His mother, my grandmother, was from a medicine family. She’d said a lot of things that would seem strange at first but come true later in life” (p. 259). The combination of the natural treatment with the herbs and other ingredients of nature and shamanism for the psychic treatment helps maintain the health of mind and body of these people. It illustrates the ways indigenous people maintained their overall health.

The tribal people value community welfare highly. Individuality is placed under the community. Accordingly, they set the social rules and regulations. They believe that natural resources, like land, forest, animals, and others, belong to the whole society. Rather than having individual ownership, they own it collectively. However, the colonial political intervention challenges this belief. The Europeans promoted individual ownership and commodified the resources for money. Erdrich (2012) illustrates the context of 1823 in *The Round House* on the land issue. She writes, “The United States is forty-seven years old, and the entire country is based on grabbing Indian land as quickly as possible in as many ways as can be humanly devised” (p. 717). The socio-cultural organization is affected by encroachment, land ownership, and resource changes.

The individualism promoted by capitalism harms the welfare of the community as it brings a conflict to the community. Consequently, it changes the beliefs and values of indigenous communities. Consequently, social connectivity and unity are broken.

The colonial incursion impacts the religious sphere also. The missionaries employ religion as a means to have political control. They try to detach the natives from their own spiritual practices through the religious conversion to Christianity. For example, Cappy’s girlfriend comes to North Dakota from

Montana to convert the Native Americans into Christian. Though the Native Americans follow their own religions, attempts are made by the outsiders to derail them from such ideologies. In various ways, the Natives integrate spirituality into their living. This is reflected in cultural ceremonies. For instance, the Shaking Tent Ceremony gets special regard from the Ojibwe people. They believe such a ceremony heals people and helps answer spiritual questions (p.171). During this ceremony, drinking alcohol is prohibited because it violates sacred etiquette. They try to maintain social peace and discipline through spiritual practices. Unlike the institutionalized Christianity that spreads through the missionaries, the spiritual practices of the Native Americans are contextual and practiced based, which aim for social harmony.

Spirituality connects the Indians with the animal world through the clan system. They believe that humans and animals depend on one another. Animals' spirits are connected to humans'. To illustrate, Buffalo woman's spirit speaks to Nanapush and tells the story of the declining buffaloes and their relation with other animals. Not only animals, the American Indians believe that all livings and non-livings connect each other. In this regard, K. L. Walters et al. (2013), in their "My Spirit in My Heart': Identity Experiences and Challenges among American Indian Two-Spirit Women", argue that indigenous communities accept the interdependency among human and nature, physical and spiritual, ancestors and future generations. They get connected in spiritual ways (p.627). Therefore, spirituality is a part of indigenous life. The colonial missionaries crusade to break this type of spiritual understanding by imposing their own religious values so that they could gain political control in the name of religion and civilization.

Oral tradition serves as the lifeline for the survival of indigenous ideologies and cultural practices. The folklores and other narratives connect the generations. Despite their continuation, significant erosion takes place in the

lifeline since the colonial invasion infiltrates into the indigenous narratives. So, the folklore listening culture is declining gradually. Paula Gunn Allen (2001), in her “Kochinnenako in Academe: Three approaches to Interpreting a Keres Indian Tale,” argues, “if the oral tradition is altered in certain subtle, fundamental ways if elements alien to it are introduced so that its internal coherence is disturbed, it becomes the major instrument of colonization and oppression” (p. 2110). So, due to the incursion, the challenge for the American Indians is how to give continuity to the oral narratives that guide their cultural practices.

Conclusion

After exploring *The Round House* on the issue of the American Indian ideologies, I conclude that ideologies play a prime role in shaping indigenous societies' socio-political organization and cultural practices. The guiding principles that pave the way to indigenous life, like ecological sustainability, collective responsibility, and community welfare, seem to compromise under changing ideologies. The problem with the tribal societies in the context of *The Round House* is that ethically held social organizations and practices are facing a crisis since the beliefs that shaped these societies have been losing their effects on the new generations. Behind the cultural erosion and ethical degeneration, the intercultural interaction, the imposition of foreign values and the rise of individualism have a major share.

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