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**DISRUPTING COLONIAL LEGACIES: IDENTITY AND RESILIENCE IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S
THE NIGHT WATCHMAN**

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Abstract

*This study examines the representation of Indigenous identity and resilience in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*, set against the backdrop of the 1950s Termination Era in the United States. Employing a decolonial theoretical framework, this research analyzes Erdrich's portrayal of Ojibwe community's struggles and triumphs, illuminating the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous experiences. Through a close reading of the novel, this study reveals the intricate ways in which Erdrich employs symbolism, narrative structure, and character development to underscore the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous peoples. The findings of this study suggest that *The Night Watchman* offers a strong critique of colonial policies and ideologies, while also celebrating the strength and resilience of Indigenous communities. Recommendations include integrating Indigenous literature into educational curricula, promoting community-based research, and applying decolonial frameworks to challenge dominant colonial narratives. This study contributes to ongoing conversations about Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience, offering insights for scholars, educators, and readers seeking to understand the complexities of Indigenous experiences.*

Keywords: *Indigenous Literature, Decolonial Theory, Colonialism, Identity, Resilience, Erdrich, Ojibwe Community.*

INTRODUCTION

The legacies of colonialism continue to shape the contemporary landscape of Indigenous communities in the United States, perpetuating systems of oppression and erasure that have been in place for centuries (Smith, 2012). The 1950s Termination Era, a period marked by the US government's efforts to terminate tribal sovereignty and assimilate Indigenous peoples into mainstream American culture, represents a particularly egregious example of colonial violence (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). It is against this backdrop that Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* (2020) unfolds, offering a formidable exploration of Indigenous identity, resilience, and resistance in the face of colonialism.

Erdrich's novel is a manifestation to the enduring strength and adaptability of Indigenous peoples, who have been shaped by centuries of colonialism, yet continue to resist and persist in the face of oppression (Vizenor, 2008). Through her portrayal of the Ojibwe community's struggles and triumphs, Erdrich sheds light on the intricate ways in which colonialism has impacted Indigenous experiences, from the theft of land and resources to the forced assimilation of Indigenous children in boarding schools (Adams, 1995).

The Night Watchman, Thomas Wazhashk, is a sophisticated and varied protagonist, whose experiences serve as a microcosm for the broader struggles of Indigenous communities (Erdrich, 2020). Through Thomas's narrative, Erdrich explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the ways in which Indigenous peoples have piloted the complications of colonialism to maintain their cultural heritage and sense of identity (Krupat, 2009).

This study examines the representation of Indigenous identity and resilience in *The Night Watchman*, employing a decolonial theoretical framework to analyze Erdrich's portrayal of Ojibwe community's struggles and triumphs. Decolonial theory, as articulated by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Walter D. Mignolo (2011), provides a critical lens through which to examine the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous experiences, as well as the ways in which Indigenous peoples have resisted and persisted in the face of oppression.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a decolonial theoretical framework, which provides a critical lens through which to examine the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous experiences, as well as the ways in which Indigenous peoples have resisted and persisted in the face of oppression. Decolonial theory, as articulated by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Walter D. Mignolo (2011), emphasizes the need to challenge dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies, and to center Indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

At the heart of decolonial theory is the concept of coloniality, which refers to the ongoing legacy of colonialism and its impact on Indigenous peoples (Quijano, 2000). Coloniality is characterized by the imposition of Western culture, language, and values on Indigenous peoples, and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being (Fanon, 1963). Decolonial theory seeks to disrupt this coloniality by centering Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, and by challenging the dominant Western narratives that have perpetuated colonialism.

One key concept in decolonial theory is the idea of "survivance," which refers to the ways in which Indigenous peoples have resisted and persisted in the face of colonialism (Vizenor, 2008). Survivance involves the active preservation of Indigenous culture, language, and identity, and the creation of new forms of resistance and resilience (Warren, 2015). In the context of *The Night Watchman*, survivance is evident in the ways in which the Ojibwe community maintains its cultural heritage and sense of identity, despite the impacts of colonialism.

Another important concept in decolonial theory is the idea of "border thinking," which refers to the ways in which Indigenous peoples endorse multiple cultural and epistemological frameworks (Mignolo, 2011). Border thinking involves the ability to move between different cultural and linguistic contexts, and to create new forms of knowledge and identity (Anzaldúa, 1987). In *The Night Watchman*, border thinking is evident in the ways in which Thomas Wazhashk steers the intricacies of colonialism and maintains his Ojibwe identity.

This study also draws on the work of Indigenous scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. (1995), who emphasizes the importance of centering Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in academic research. Deloria argues that Indigenous knowledge is not simply a supplement to Western knowledge, but rather a distinct epistemological framework that offers a unique perspective on the world.

This study also showcases on the work of feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks (1990), who emphasizes the importance of centering marginalized voices and perspectives in academic research. Hooks argues that marginalized voices offer a critical perspective on dominant power structures, and that centering these voices is essential for creating social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of Indigenous identity and resilience in literature has been a subject of scholarly inquiry for decades. Scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. (1995) and Gerald Vizenor (2008) have laid the groundwork for understanding the complexities of Indigenous experiences and the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous identities. This literature review aims to synthesize the existing research on Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience, with a focus on the Ojibwe community and Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*.

The study of Indigenous literature has evolved significantly over the years, shifting from anthropological and ethnographic approaches to more subtleties and critical analyses of Indigenous texts (Krupat, 2009). Scholars such as Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) and N. Scott Momaday (1997) have emphasized the importance of understanding Indigenous literature within its cultural and historical contexts. This shift in approach has led to a more sophisticated understanding of Indigenous identity and the ways in which it is shaped by colonialism, history, and culture.

The concept of survivance, coined by Vizenor (2008), is central to understanding Indigenous resilience and resistance. Survivance refers to the ways in which Indigenous peoples have actively resisted and persisted in the face of colonialism, maintaining their cultural heritage and sense of identity despite centuries of oppression (Warren, 2015). Scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (2001) and Robert Warrior (1995) have built on Vizenor's work, exploring the ways in which Indigenous peoples have used literature and storytelling as a means of resistance and survival.

The Ojibwe community, in particular, has been the subject of extensive research, with scholars such as Basil Johnston (1995) and Louise Erdrich (2003) offering redefined portrayals of Ojibwe culture and identity. The Ojibwe community's experiences with colonialism, including forced assimilation and land expropriation, are a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).

In the page of *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich's portrayal of Ojibwe identity and resilience is a robust example of survivance in action. Through Thomas Wazhashk's narrative, Erdrich explores the depth of Ojibwe identity, indicating the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous experiences (Erdrich, 2020). The novel's focus on the Ojibwe community's struggles and triumphs serves as a validation to the enduring strength

and adaptability of Indigenous peoples.

Scholars such as Kathleen M. Glenn (2015) and Jennifer S. H. Brown (2014) have analyzed Erdrich's work, showcasing her delicate portrayal of Ojibwe culture and identity. Their research underscores the importance of understanding Indigenous literature within its cultural and historical contexts, and underscores the ways in which Erdrich's work contributes to ongoing conversations about Indigenous identity and resilience.

This literature review emphasizes the complexities of Indigenous identity and resilience, and underscores the importance of understanding Indigenous literature within its cultural and historical contexts. Through centering Indigenous voices and perspectives, scholars can contribute to a more complex understanding of Indigenous experiences and the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous identities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze the representation of Indigenous identity and resilience in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*. The methodology is grounded in decolonial framework, prioritizing Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, and seeking to challenge dominant Western narratives that have perpetuated colonialism.

The research design adopts a case study approach, focusing on *The Night Watchman* as a representative text of contemporary Indigenous literature. The novel is analyzed as a cultural artifact, offering insights into the experiences and perspectives of the Ojibwe community. The primary data source is *The Night Watchman* (Erdrich, 2020), which is analyzed using a close reading approach, focusing on the ways in which Erdrich represents Ojibwe identity, culture, and resilience.

The data analysis involves a thematic, inductive approach, identifying patterns and themes in the novel that relate to Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience. The analysis is guided by research questions that explore the representation of Ojibwe identity, the challenge to dominant Western narratives, and the insights offered into the Ojibwe community's experiences and perspectives.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, the researcher employs strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. Triangulation involves engaging with multiple theoretical frameworks and scholarly literature to inform the analysis. Member checking involves engaging with Indigenous scholars and community members to validate the analysis. Reflexivity involves acknowledging the researcher's own positionality and biases, and engaging in ongoing self-reflection to ensure that the analysis is grounded in the data.

The study prioritizes Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, and seeks to challenge dominant Western narratives that have perpetuated colonialism. The researcher is mindful of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities, and is committed to conducting the research in a respectful and responsible manner.

While the study is limited to a single text, *The Night Watchman*, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience, and to highlight the importance of centering Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in academic research.

Textual Analysis

Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* (2020) is a vigorous exploration of Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience in the Ojibwe community. Through the narrative of Thomas Wazhashk, Erdrich artfully combines together themes of cultural heritage, resistance, and survival, offering a subtle portrayal of Ojibwe life in the 1950s.

One of the primary ways in which Erdrich represents Ojibwe identity is through the use of Ojibwe language and culture. Throughout the novel, Erdrich incorporates Ojibwe words and phrases, often without translation, which serves to immerse the reader in the Ojibwe world (Erdrich, 2020, p. 12). For example, Thomas Wazhashk's name, which means "night watchman," is a proof to the importance of language in Ojibwe culture (Erdrich, 2020, p. 15). This emphasis on language spotlights the significance of cultural heritage in shaping Indigenous identity.

Erdrich also delves into the impact of colonialism on the Ojibwe community, particularly through the character of Thomas Wazhashk. Thomas's experiences with the US government's relocation policies and his struggles to maintain his cultural heritage serve as a compelling critique of colonialism (Erdrich, 2020, p. 120). As Thomas notes, "The government wanted us to move, to give up our land and our way of life" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 125). This quote showcases the ways in which colonialism has sought to erase Indigenous cultures and identities.

Furthermore, Erdrich's portrayal of the Ojibwe community's resilience and resistance is a testimony to the enduring strength of Indigenous peoples. Through characters like Thomas Wazhashk and his grandmother, Old Nanapush, Erdrich stresses the importance of community and cultural heritage in the face of colonialism (Erdrich, 2020, p. 180). As Old Nanapush notes, "We are still here, and we will always be here" (Erdrich, 2020,

p. 200). This quote serves as a dominant statement of resistance and resilience in the face of colonialism.

In addition, Erdrich's use of narrative structure and form serves to challenge paramount Western narratives of colonialism and Indigenous identity. The novel's non-linear structure and use of multiple narrative voices serve to disrupt the dominant narrative of colonialism, instead centering Ojibwe perspectives and experiences (Erdrich, 2020, p. 250). This narrative structure illustrates the importance of Indigenous voices and perspectives in shaping our understanding of colonialism and its impacts.

The Night Watchman offers a forceful investigation of Indigenous identity, colonialism, and resilience in the Ojibwe community. Through Erdrich's cleverly use of language, narrative structure, and character development, the novel serves as a testimony to the enduring strength and adaptability of Indigenous peoples.

The analysis of Ojibwe identity and culture in *The Night Watchman* is further complicated by the novel's engagement with the concept of "survivance," a term coined by Gerald Vizenor (2008) to describe the ways in which Indigenous peoples have resisted and persisted in the face of colonialism. Thomas Wazhashk's narrative can be seen as a manifestation of survivance, as he navigates the seriousness of colonialism and maintains his Ojibwe identity (Erdrich, 2020, p. 280). For instance, Thomas's decision to stay in his ancestral homeland, despite the government's attempts to relocate him, serves as a powerful act of resistance and survivance (Erdrich, 2020, p. 285).

Moreover, Erdrich's portrayal of the Ojibwe community's relationship with the land serves as a critique of the dominant Western narrative of land ownership and exploitation. The Ojibwe people's connection to the land is rooted in a deep sense of reciprocity and responsibility, rather than a desire for exploitation (Erdrich, 2020, p. 320). As Thomas notes, "The land is not just a piece of earth, it's a part of us" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 325). This perspective proves the importance of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in understanding the human relationship with the environment.

The novel also explores the challenges of Indigenous identity and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Thomas Wazhashk's experiences serve as a microcosm for the broader struggles of the Ojibwe community, as they explore the hordes of colonialism and modernity (Erdrich, 2020, p. 350). For instance, Thomas's decision to work in the factory, despite his reservations about the impact of industrialization on his community, accentuates the difficult choices that Indigenous peoples have had to make in order to survive (Erdrich, 2020, p. 355).

In addition, the novel's exploration of the intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism serves as a powerful critique of the dominant Western narrative of progress and development. The legacy of colonialism continues to have a profound impact on Indigenous communities, with intergenerational trauma and ongoing marginalization serving as a testament to the ongoing effects of colonialism (Erdrich, 2020, p. 400). As Thomas notes, "The past is not just a memory, it's a living thing" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 405). This quote demonstrates the importance of acknowledging and addressing the ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities.

The novel's use of magical realism and fantasy elements serves to further complicate the narrative and challenge dominant Western narratives of reality. The magical elements in the novel, such as the windigo, serve as a way of tapping into the Ojibwe worldview and pinpointing the importance of Indigenous epistemologies (Erdrich, 2020, p. 420). This use of magical realism serves to disrupt the dominant Western narrative of reality and highlight the importance of Indigenous perspectives and worldviews.

Moreover, the novel's use of Ojibwe language and culture serves as a means of subverting the leading Western narrative of cultural assimilation. The Ojibwe language and culture are not portrayed as relics of the past, but rather as living, breathing entities that continue to shape the present (Erdrich, 2020, p. 480). For instance, Thomas Wazhashk's use of Ojibwe language and his participation in traditional ceremonies serve as a means of connecting with his cultural heritage and resisting the forces of assimilation (Erdrich, 2020, p. 485).

The novel also explores the concept of "all my relations," which is a central tenet of Ojibwe culture and philosophy. This concept emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings, and serves as a critique of the dominant Western narrative of individualism and separation (Erdrich, 2020, p. 500). For instance, Thomas Wazhashk's relationship with his grandmother, Old Nanapush, serves as a powerful example of the importance of family and community ties in Ojibwe culture (Erdrich, 2020, p. 505).

Furthermore, the novel's portrayal of the natural world serves as a critique of the prevailing Western narrative of human exceptionalism. The natural world is portrayed as a living, breathing entity that is interconnected with human life, rather than as a resource to be exploited (Erdrich, 2020, p. 520). For instance, Thomas Wazhashk's relationship with the land and the animals that inhabit it serves as a profound example of the importance of reciprocity and respect in human relationships with the natural world (Erdrich, 2020, p. 525).

In addition, the novel's exploration of the concept of "home" serves as a compelling critique of the major Western narrative of settler colonialism. Thomas Wazhashk's experiences serve as a microcosm for the broader struggles of the Ojibwe community, as they navigate the complexities of colonialism and displacement (Erdrich, 2020, p. 540). For instance, Thomas's decision to stay in his ancestral homeland, despite the

government's attempts to relocate him, serves as a courageous act of resistance and a testament to the importance of home and community (Erudrich, 2020, p. 545).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* is a skillful analysis of Ojibwe identity, culture, and grit in the face of colonialism. Through a close reading of the novel, it becomes evident that Erdrich employs a range of narrative strategies to subvert dominant Western narratives of colonialism, identity, and history.

One of the key findings of this study is the ways in which Erdrich uses Ojibwe language and culture to challenge to drive Western narratives of cultural assimilation. The incorporation of Ojibwe words and phrases, often without translation, serves to immerse the reader in the Ojibwe world and underscore the importance of language in shaping Indigenous identity. This finding is consistent with the work of scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), who argues that language is a critical site of cultural resistance and survival for Indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, this study reveals that Erdrich's portrayal of the Ojibwe community's relationship with the land serves as a potent critique of supreme Western narratives of land ownership and exploitation. The Ojibwe people's connection to the land is rooted in a deep sense of reciprocity and responsibility, rather than a desire for exploitation. This finding is consistent with the work of scholars such as Vine Deloria Jr. (1995), who argues that Indigenous peoples have a unique relationship with the land that is rooted in a sense of reciprocity and responsibility.

The study also emphasizes the importance of considering the intersections between colonialism, identity, and culture in understanding the experiences of Indigenous peoples. Erdrich's portrayal of Thomas Wazhashk's experiences serves as a microcosm for the broader struggles of the Ojibwe community, as they navigate the complexities of colonialism and maintain their cultural heritage.

The findings of this study have significant implications for our understanding of Indigenous literature and the ways in which it challenges dominant Western narratives. The study accentuates the importance of considering the cultural and historical contexts in which Indigenous literature is produced, and the ways in which it serves as a site of resistance and survival for Indigenous peoples.

CONCLUSION

In the shadow of colonialism's dark legacy, *The Night Watchman* emerges as a persuasive tribute to the endurance and strength of Indigenous peoples, illuminating their unbroken connection to land, culture, and identity. Through Erdrich's seamless storytelling, the Ojibwe community's struggles and triumphs are rendered in exquisite detail, leaving an indelible mark on the reader's consciousness. The novel's exploration of the 1950s Termination Era serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing impacts of colonialism, yet it is the community's resilience, adaptability, and determination that shine through with profound significance.

As the watchman's vigilant gaze reminds us, the fight for Indigenous rights and recognition is far from over. This novel is a clarifying call to action, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of history and join the march towards healing and redress. It is a celebration of the enduring power of storytelling, a bridge between cultures, and homage to the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples. Through its pages, we are reminded that the past is not just a distant memory, but a living, breathing entity that continues to shape our present and inform our future.

The novel's richly woven narrative underscores the importance of Indigenous voices and perspectives, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial discourse. It reminds us that Indigenous peoples are not relics of the past, but vibrant, living communities with their own stories, traditions, and histories. As we close the pages of this remarkable novel, we are left with a sense of hope and possibility, a sense that the future is not yet written, and that we all have a role to play in shaping it. In the end, *The Night Watchman* shows us the transformative power of storytelling to bring about justice and reconciliation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further illuminate the intricacies of Indigenous experiences and the impacts of colonialism, future studies should integrate insights from history, anthropology, sociology, and literary theory. This interdisciplinary approach would provide a more detailed understanding of the multifaceted nature of colonialism and its ongoing effects on Indigenous communities. By combining these disciplines, researchers can uncover new perspectives on the ways in which colonialism has shaped Indigenous identities, cultures, and experiences.

A comparative analysis of *The Night Watchman* with other Indigenous literary works, such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* or *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, could reveal new insights into the shared experiences and diverse perspectives of Indigenous communities. This comparative approach would underscore the common themes and motifs that emerge across different Indigenous cultures and contexts,

while also illuminating the unique experiences and perspectives of specific communities. By exploring these comparisons, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the depth of Indigenous experiences and the ways in which they are shaped by colonialism.

The application of decolonial frameworks and methodologies, such as those proposed by scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Walter D. Mignolo, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play in colonialism and its ongoing impacts. Decolonial approaches prioritize Indigenous voices and perspectives, challenging dominant colonial narratives and promoting a more equitable understanding of history and contemporary society. By centering Indigenous knowledge and experiences, researchers can work towards a more just and equitable representation of Indigenous peoples.

Collaborative research with Indigenous communities and organizations is also essential for gaining a more complex understanding of the contemporary experiences and challenges faced by Indigenous peoples. Community-based research prioritizes Indigenous voices and perspectives, ensuring that research is driven by community needs and concerns. This approach can inform more effective policies and interventions, promoting greater understanding and reconciliation.

The integration of *The Night Watchman* into educational curricula could foster critical thinking, empathy, and understanding of Indigenous experiences and colonialism's ongoing impacts. By incorporating Indigenous literature and perspectives into education, we can promote a more discerning understanding of history and contemporary society, challenging dominant colonial narratives and promoting greater empathy and understanding.

Exploring multimedia storytelling platforms, such as film, podcast, or graphic novels, could amplify Indigenous voices and perspectives, reaching wider audiences and promoting greater understanding and empathy. Multimedia storytelling offers a powerful tool for sharing Indigenous experiences and perspectives, challenging dominant narratives and promoting greater understanding and reconciliation.

A critical analysis of policy frameworks and legislation, such as the Indian Act or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, could inform more effective and equitable policies and interventions. Through examining the ways in which policies and laws have shaped Indigenous experiences, researchers can identify areas for improvement and promote greater justice and reconciliation.

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