Colonization Trauma Writing in *Shadow Tag* by Louise Erdrich

Chao Wang*, Fengshan Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, China.

How to cite this paper: Chao Wang, Fengshan Liu. (2022) Colonization Trauma Writing in *Shadow Tag* by Louise Erdrich. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 6(3), 475-478. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2022.09.030

Received: September 18, 2022
Accepted: October 6, 2022
Published: October 19, 2022

*Corresponding author: Chao Wang, School of Foreign Languages, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000, China.

Abstract

*Shadow Tag* is one of the representative works of Louise Erdrich. It takes a modern native American family in Twin cities of Minnesota as its trauma narrative space, and depicting the substantial trauma raised by the colonized history of native Americans to their national psychology. This paper explores from executing text reading to elaborate on how Erdrich established the metaphorical world of a modern native-American family in *Shadow Tag*. Whereby the metaphorical world of this novel, Erdrich reveals the historical memory and colonial trauma of native Americans. In addition, it is also necessary to analyze the mixed race—Riel, created by Irene and Gill in the novel. Her loss of the native American community notion and the alienation from tribal groups led to her national identity crisis. Eventually, with the help of her memory charts, Riel reestablished her connection with tribal groups and tribal cultural traditions, retrieved her native American identity and recovered her colonial trauma.

Keywords

*Shadow Tag*, Trauma Writing, Colonization Metaphor

1. Introduction

Louise Erdrich is one of the most influential native female writers in contemporary American literature. Since the publication of her first full-length novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), she has put out more than 20 novels and poems. She won wide popular and critical acclaim through her literary works, such as the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Association Award and so forth. Her works of literature have a stark creative feature, in other words, she attempts to break away from the white mainstream literary paradigm and construct a literary subject with native cultural characteristics. In addition, Erdrich highlights the importance of native American cultural traditions and collective cultural communities such as tribes and families through her literary creations (Chen Liang, 2018). At the same time, she also notices the painful historical memories of native Americans suffering when the contemporary Native American culture interchanges, confronts, and integrates with the mainstream culture. Her novel, the *Shadow Tag* is, to a large extent, a reflection of the Native American community on its colonial past and its unremitting efforts to recover from the historical trauma.

The *Shadow Tag* also presents the danger of the disintegration of the native American cultural tradition under the erosion of the contemporary white culture. The marriage breakdown of native American families in this novel has become a literary metaphor to reveal the survival and death of contemporary native American cultural traditions and even the social foundation. Erdrich takes Irene’s nude portrait as the point of penetration, and revolves around the trauma narration of the three main characters: Gill, Irene and Riel, shows the hidden violent conflicts in the contemporary native American families and the hidden resistance of American native Americans to the white cultural colonization in artistry.
2. Gill’s “Other” Confusion of Colonization

Gill is a painter who has achieved some success. He exerts chiseled craft painting techniques to depict the scenes of native American community suffered by white colony in colonial period. And Irene’s image becomes his best tool for this topic: “he refused to use the tender way portrayed Irene, he makes the humiliation suffering Irene into something more powerful... A representative symbol of the suffering of a nation” (Erdrich, L, 2020). The homogenized relations between Irene and native American groups portrayed by Gill are the reflection of Gill’s “other-ness” from another perspective (Morrison, S, 2014).

Irene’s parents are Indian, her mother Winnie Jane brought up Irene alone. In spite of Winnie Jane in the narrative time of this novel uses no longer the Ojibwa family name she used before her marriage, Agigaka Crane is still her approved clan. Jane also insisted on raising Irene as an Ojibwa, forcing her to learn about Ojibwa history and culture (Erdrich, L, 2020). Gill and Irene are different. In the first half of the novel, Gill mentioned that his blood is only one-quarter Indian, so that the other three quarters are “other blood”, and as such, “the tribal blood to which he belonged at the time... It was not recognized” (Erdrich, L, 2020). Gill, in Erdrich’s view, has been to the edge of culture, rejected both by mainstream white social groups and by native Americans. As a result of chronic living in the gap, Gill’s desire for authority and identity gradually made him produced a “morbid impulse” (Erdrich, L, 2020), which turned his demand for identity construction into violence to his family, and constantly carried out morbid control and abuse to his family, ultimately leading to his alienation.

Gill asked Irene to strike erotic poses when he painted her. He had nothing in mind when he arranged her poses other than his portraits of her life. “He was pretty sure she married him for his art,” Gill had to admit, “and then slowly found that living with his art was dreadful and unattractive.” (Erdrich, L, 2020). He never asked Irene’s opinion: “What kind of painting do you want?” He asked her to hold her breath while he drew. Gradually, Irene became discrete from her real images, which took on a life of their own. She was unable to recognize the authenticity of the created images on the paintings, unable to determine the boundary between reality and painting, and eventually, she lost her personal identity. Gill relies on Irene’s body for wealth, and Irene uses it as an avenue to maintain her family life with Gill. The relationship between Gill and Irene is the colonizers versus the colonized (Morrison, S, 2014), which symbolizes the relations between the European colonists and the native American groups in the early colonial period.

Gill is the “other” in the native social groups and marginalized by the white society, but he constantly hinted to Irene that he has white blood, assimilated the white culture in his heart, and always attempted to control his wife and children for constructing the image of white colonist. Although Irene, resembles Gill, was raised by her mother, Irene received an elite middle-class education, and Gill never attended art school, reading and drawing on her own. Irene and her mother, Vinnie Jane, both identified themselves as Native Americans and were proud of their identity. Gill’s mother was white and her father was a native American soldier killed in Vietnam. In fact, Irene has said that Gill was unable to understand his eldest son Florian because he never really knew his father (Erdrich, L, 2020). For Gill, who assimilated the white culture, Irene’s nude portraits were coincided with the stereotypical image of Indian women in white society, that is, the image of “prostitute other” with large breasts and buttocks. Therefore, the debate between Irene and Gill about “kitschy” takes on a special symbolic significance: “It is almost impossible to paint something that is not kitschy, Irene, but if you like painting, you will paint anyway. I took the chance! Naked women are kitsch, you are kitsch!” (Erdrich, L, 2020). As a result, the kitsch nude portraits of native American women became the concentrated embodiment of the white mainstream society to cultural define and colonize the group behavior of native American people.

3. Irene’s Colonial Trauma

Lakoff & Johnson, the founders of cognitive linguistics, coming up with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, believe that “metaphor permeates daily life, not only in language, but also in thinking and human activities. Our conceptual system of thinking and action is essentially metaphorical.” (Zhang Wei, 11). Erdrich presents the colonial trauma in the form of a native family conflicts for metaphor. Irene’s name has a deeply metaphorical sense. Irene’s maiden name was ‘America’, “It originated from Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. It was Vespucci who published the first map of the east coast of America, from which the two continents got their names. Irene’s ancestor, Amerigo Halls, a famous chieftain had been also given the name because of it.” (Erdrich, L, 2020). The Irene’s family surname had obvious metaphorical characteristics and became the incarnation of the Native American groups colonized by European colonists.
The Aboriginal Ojibwa believe that a person’s power comes from his or her own shadow, through which he or she can capture the soul (Erdrich, L., 2020). Irene believed that Gill had stepped on her shadow while painting her, and although she attempted to drag it out from under Gill’s feet, she could not “move the tangled darkness under his heel” (Erdrich, L., 2020). Irene’s portrait was embroidered and exaggerated by Gill, making for obscuring her true side and causing people are not the same views as she sees herself. However, for feeding their family, Irene accepts Gill’s design, allowing him to “depict her crawling on the ground as if she had been beaten, growling like a dog, bleeding, and that was during her period... He also painted a series of landscapes, huge canvases filled with light... She was raped, mutilated and died of smallpox.” (Erdrich. L, 2020). Gill’s violent description distorted Irene’s real identity, causing her to suffer great mental pressure and trauma, which eventually initiated her alcoholism. Irene accepts Gill’s definition of her body because she is financially reliant on her patronage, that is to say, she relies on Gill to maintain her social identity, which is made possible by Gill’s success but at the same time her old identity is disappearing with each portrait of Gill (Morrison. S, 2014).

In their marriage, Gill’s exploitation and oppression for Irene reflected the exploitation and oppression of the early colonists to the American native groups. Irene’s double trauma, both physical and mental, reflected the truly historical trauma of the American native groups. The trauma brought by the colonists to the Native American people was multifaceted, collective and intergenerational. Kaplan argues that “the ancestors of native American nations suffered violence and disaster as western settlers invaded their homeland... Those who suffered from the disaster... They may experience repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors that delay responses. When it comes to intergenerational trauma, the next generation is haunted by the trauma caused by the disaster, which affects their parents, grandparents or distant ancestors without them realizing it.” (Kaplan. E. A, 2005).

By means of the core codes for Irene’s nude portrait, Erdrich reveals the mental trauma suffered by the whole indigenious population through a native marriage breakdown of this novel. Due to Gill’s acts of violence happens more frequently against Irene and her children, Riel becomes anxious, impassive, moody and even skeptical of the basic human emotions such as domestic affection, friendship and love. Even when a hypothetical disaster occurred, her first thought was that she “would be the one left behind” (Erdrich. L, 2020). The intergenerational trauma from Irene made Riel feel isolated and helpless, showing an autistic tendency and unwilling to communicate with others.

It is evident that in the history of colonial expansion and the gradual spread of racist emotions in the United States, the native American community and its mixed race with the white people have experienced an indelible pain. (Yang Heng, 2014). It is not only the parties in the colonial context who suffer such pain, but also their next generation. Trauma is often projected onto their bodies, and their bodies become carriers of their historical trauma. (Dong Xiaoye, 2018). Irene, who was oppressed by Gill, stared at Gill “with a dead emptiness”, while the subconscious movements of children’s bodies when facing their fathers reflected the traumatic memories imprinted on the next generation. When Gill’s hand fell, Riel ‘flinched’ and his eldest son Florian ‘put his hand over his head and stepped back’ (Erdrich. L, 2020). Confronting the violent acts of Gill, Irene and her children made subconscious reactions, combined with Gill’s racial identity, these subconscious reactions starkly emblemed the psychological trauma caused by the early European white colonial’s persecution for native American community, and this trauma gradually becomes the excruciating indigenous community descendant’s collective memory (Yang Heng, 2014).

4. Riel’s Trauma Healing

Colonial trauma is defined by native American traumatic researchers as “a kind of collective complex trauma for groups who having the specific group identity or affiliation, race, nationality and religious affiliation, which would make a difference to the thoughts, dreams and behaviors of the collective interior members, inhibiting them to build normal cultural identities. Colonial trauma can impact the construction of an individual’s social and cultural identity.” (Heart. M, 2019). As a young mixed Indian, Riel had never encountered the suffering and oppression of her ancestors suffered under the colonial period, but she was greatly exerted a strong influence on the process of intergenerational transmission of colonial trauma. As a hybrid of white and native descent, identical with all colonial objects, Riel also cannot get rid of the influence of their own cultural tradition, historical memory, colonial trauma and the cultural definition of ethnic groups by the mainstream white society (Morrison. S, 2014). Kaplan points out that historical memory and colonial trauma have a great impact on the native American groups and will continue to inhabit the form of intergenerational inheritance (Kaplan. E. A, 2005).

The colonial trauma is further extended in Riel, like her parents, whose performance reveals the cultural condition of contemporary mixed-race native Americans. Riel is the product of Irene and Gill. While Irene and Gill represent native Americans and European colonists, Riel represents the struggle and interaction between colonizers and colonized people and their history and culture. But unlike Irene, who passively accepted the white colonial dominating, nor identical with Gill, who venerated the mainstream white culture, Riel identified with the native cul-
tural tradition and defied the colonial domination of white. Riel’s name is symbolically derived from Louise Riel, the chief of Metis, and he was also a rebel against the white government at that time. Louise Riel is seen as a great hero in Erdrich’s earlier work, The Plague of Dove. Riel once led the native Americans and Metis in a failed rebellion against the Canadian government’s seizure of native American land of that time. Riel was sentenced to death by hanging (Yang Heng, 2014). Erdrich also used the name Riel as a metaphor for native Americans’ indomitable struggle against white colony’s savage expansion and colonial plunder in the Shadow Tag.

For escaping Gill’s control, Riel endeavored to exercise her survival skills and strengthens her ability to deal with all kinds of blows. Riel’s revolt to Gill is most vividly shown in the debate over whether to adopt a stray cat: “Gill was countered a hard-boiled rage this time, and she pushed him away with all her strength. Gill was astonished.” After that, Riel lain in bed and relished her victory. “She felt the same heavy joy again, the same joy that came over her when her father’s body fell backward and did not hit her back.” (Erdrich. L, 2020). In fact, Riel’s resistance was to declare her complete self and her right of control to Gill. Erdrich uses this scene to proclaim the freedom of the will of the native American groups to Gill and the white society, rejecting any form of colonial control.

Riel, who was of mixed race, repulsed the colonists’ definition of her and instead emphasized her native cultural identity. Different from Irene, Riel’s trauma originates from her alienation from the tribal groups and the loss of the concept of Indian community, which is an unavoidable experience for American native American teenagers and a problem that Erdrich has been concerned about. After charting her memory, Riel eventually “for the first time aware that she was an Indian, an American Indian, a native American. Most of her memories relate to prayers for healing, visits to her grandmother, vigils, ceremonies, and she remembers putting her tobacco on the ground and praying with her mother. A lot of things haven’t been done in years, but she’s still native Americans.” (Erdrich. L, 2020). Ultimately, with the help of her memory charts, Riel recovered her native American identity, and finally cured the mental trauma caused by the white society to her generation.

5. Conclusion

Reviewing this novel, the world of three characters, Gill, Irene and Riel, is based on the integration of the traditional culture of the native groups and the white culture of the United States. It is the product of a novel mixed culture, and it is always full of repression and resistance. Gill didn’t inhibit his desire from white colonists to dominate and plunder against the native Americans, and he becomes the colonist in the story of Irene and Riel. Irene became the embodiment of the colonized, but she revolts Gill by the red and blue diary she wrote, which is the embodiment of Irene and Riel as narrators and colonized indigenous group consciousness. Gill’s attempt to control his wife and children is difficult to achieve, and eventually he could only commit suicide to announce the grave of his colonization control. This novel has a tragic ending, Irene died for saving Gill. But looking on the bright side, this ending makes readers have the incentive to reflect on the trauma caused by white colonial domination to native American groups, but also reveals the new generation of native American groups represented by Riel to attempt to wind up this colonial trauma.

References


