

Cultural Authenticity and Western Influence: Examining Tradition and Transformation in Louise Erdrich's *the Night Watchman*

Zainab Aroba Umer^{1*}, Dr Qasim Shafiq²

^{1*}PhD Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad

²Head, Department of English, Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Email: dr.qasimshafiq@gmail.com

Abstract

David Treuer's concept of modern Native American writing emphasizes the departure from purity and authenticity in cultural representation due to the significant infusion of Western influence. The indigenous literary community, including authors, academics, and the general public, along with native voices, contribute to this research. This study explores the variety of opinions regarding Treuer's ideas and their implications. It focuses on the loss of authenticity and the effects of Western influence on cultural representation. While some critics and scholars applaud the departure from cultural truths, others express concern about the loss of cultural authenticity. Some indigenous voices celebrate this shift, while others emphasize the importance of preserving traditional cultural practices. Treuer's theory is crucial for this research, as it delves into contemporary writings of displacement, revealing the truths about the authenticity of contemporary Native American literature. This study will analyze *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich through the lens of David Treuer's ideas, as presented in *A User's Manual: Native American Fiction*. The findings will have significant implications for the future of Native American writings, particularly in relation to the need for accurate cultural representation.

Keywords: authenticity, culture, Erdrich, Native American Literature, resilience, westernization

1. Introduction

David Treuer in his book *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006) argues that modern Native American literature tends to be culturally unauthentic because it primarily borrows from Western literary forms. Treuer argues, "Our written literature in English is responsive to a set of historical circumstances, inventive in its evasiveness, rich in its suggestive capabilities, but ultimately it is not culture" (Treuer, 2006, p. 21). Since all Native American writers embrace this form, Treuer contends that the novel, being Western in structure, inevitably absorbs Western influences on storytelling. As a result, the cultural authenticity of these works is compromised. This is one of the reasons Treuer critiques Louise Erdrich, asserting that her works should not be attributed to Native American culture. He states, "Books are not reality, and prose in English is not a culture and should not be put in the position of trying to duplicate it" (Treuer, 2006, p. 21). In this view, Erdrich's novels appear to be written more for the purpose of appealing to Western audiences than for faithfully adhering to Native American storytelling traditions. These narratives are seen as more marketable but less reliable representations of Native American culture. As Treuer notes: "What makes the intelligent interrogation of Native American literature difficult is the degree to which the literature has become a central part of an argument about authenticity" (Treuer, 2006, p. 11).

2. Literature Review

While Erdrich's work is celebrated for its literary achievements and its focus is on Native American issues, it embodies the tensions identified by Treuer. By blending Western and Native traditions, Erdrich raises important questions about cultural authenticity and the influence of Western literary forms. Cooko-Whiteduck (2021) praises Erdrich's efforts to democratize Native American concerns for a broader human audience through her works of art. Gifford et al. (2021) comment that Erdrich's works highlight the complexities of modern Native American life and reshape stereotypical portrayals by offering multi-layered characterizations of Native communities. However, there has been criticism regarding the cultural authenticity of Erdrich's literary works. Ahmad et al. (2020) argue that while Erdrich's works are seminal, they echo Western voices through the literary sources and models she draws upon. Filáková (2020) notes that Erdrich's use of Western narrative techniques, such as magical realism and multi-voiced narratives, can overshadow Native American cultural elements in her stories. These Western influences, Filáková suggests, make Erdrich's work more accessible to a Western audience but simultaneously diminish its authenticity to Native traditions. Hybridization may, as Sun (2023) suggests, enrich the literary landscape; however, it could also obscure distinct Native traditions. In their critique of the commercialization of Native American literature, Ross et al. (2021) argue that pressures from the publishing industry often compel Native writers to conform. Spencer (2023) further contends that commercialization erodes cultural authenticity, as authors prioritize marketability over genuine self-expression in Native American literature.

3. Research Methodology

This research centers around an idea introduced by David Treuer in his book *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006). Treuer, an academic of Ojibwa heritage, has sparked significant debate among critics of Native American literature. His main argument challenges accepted beliefs about what qualifies as Native American literature. Treuer contends that Native

American writing is no longer confined to a static, “pure,” or conventional mode of expression. Instead, he argues that it has undergone a revolutionary transformation, adapting to new circumstances and defying strict classification.

Treuer's theory further asserts that modern Native American authors, like Erdrich, have adopted Western literary genres, techniques, and narrative approaches. He believes that this incorporation of Western elements has contributed to the development of a dynamic and evolving Native American literature. According to Treuer, this evolution should be embraced rather than viewed as a departure from cultural authenticity. By doing so, he challenges traditional notions of what it means to be an Indigenous writer and the forms that Indigenous literature should take.

Treuer's theory explores the idea that modern Native American writers often portray cultures shaped by external influences, questioning the notion of an unchanging, “authentic” Indigenous culture. He examines how colonialism, modernity, and globalization have impacted Native American culture and identities. This perspective encourages readers to engage with the complex, multidimensional narratives that reflect the realities of contemporary Native American identities and literature, prompting them to reconsider the significance of authenticity in Native American writing (Treuer, 2006, p. 123).

Treuer's ideas have sparked considerable discussion and introspection within scholarly and literary communities. His work has generated reviews and critiques that examine the origins and development of Native American literature. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how modern Native American literature, as exemplified by works such as *The Night Watchman*, reflects and embraces a changing, complex, and dynamic reality. Treuer's concept contributes to advancing knowledge about the authenticity of Native American voices and experiences in contemporary literature.

4. Text Analysis

Louise Erdrich, a leading authority in modern Native American literature, has made a name for herself with her masterful storytelling that seamlessly blends the traditional and the modern. Her writings incorporate Native voices, cultural legacies, and the complexities of contemporary Indigenous life into a rich and intricate tapestry. *The Night Watchman* is one of her most well-known works and serves as an excellent example of this literary technique. This historical novel takes readers back to the 1950s, to the Ojibwe community living on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. The story is inspired by the life of Erdrich's own grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, who served as the tribe chairman and led the opposition to the Termination Act.

The Night Watchman by Erdrich captures the complex lives of her characters as they confront the looming threat of eviction and the significant changes brought about by the U.S. government's Termination Act. This showcases her storytelling prowess. Through her characters' perspectives, Erdrich explores issues of identity, cultural preservation, and the relentless pursuit of justice. Set against the backdrop of a challenging historical period, the novel offers insights into the resilience of Native American communities and underscores the importance of preserving their identity and culture in the face of laws designed to erase their heritage. By addressing critical issues that Native American communities continue to face today, the novel highlights the enduring relevance of Native American literature and emphasizes its role in capturing and conveying the complex historical and cultural experiences of Native Americans, both past and present. Like many of Erdrich's works, *The Night Watchman* skillfully blends tradition with modernity, making it an engaging subject for an investigation into the evolution of Native American literature. The novel reflects the realities of the present while retaining the timeless essence of Indigenous cultures.

David Treuer argues that much of contemporary Native American literature, including works by other writers, lacks the authenticity that earlier Native writers brought to their work through diverse voices. *The Night Watchman* by Louise Erdrich falls into this category. It is written using various Western narrative styles and techniques. According to Kasih & Ngestirosa (2018), one of the key elements of Western literary tradition is the structured narrative arc, which involves the development of a beginning, middle, and end. This linear storytelling progression ensures that resolutions flow naturally from one event to the next. Erdrich employs this narrative structure in *The Night Watchman*, where the story of Thomas Wazhashk and the community unfolds against the backdrop of the Forced Termination Bill. The novel begins with the setting and character development, starting with a routine moment in Thomas's life: “Thomas Wazhashk removed his thermos from his armpit and set it on the steel desk alongside his scuffed briefcase” (Erdrich, 2020, p. 3).

A conflict arises, leading the narrative into the community's struggles and personal challenges, weaving together multiple storylines. For instance, this can be linked to the immense work Thomas undertakes to understand the meaning of the bill and the development of resistance. As the text suggests, “he resisted the idea that his endless work, the warmth of his family, and this identity that got him followed in stores and ejected from restaurants and movies, this way he was, for good or bad, was just another thing for a white man to acquire” (p. 214). Skibo & Madsen (2022) argue that the novel culminates in resolving the central tensions, providing a sense of satisfaction in the completion of the storylines. This structure aligns more with Western narrative conventions, contrasting with traditional Native American storytelling, which tends to be more cyclical and communal in nature. David Treuer critiques this by arguing that such Western influence undermines the authenticity of Native American literature.

Erdrich employs much characterization, a technique common in Western writing, which Treuer criticizes for making cultural experiences superficial. Stoeltje (2021), while supporting Treuer's argument, asserts that the Western storytelling method is individualistic, focusing on the psychological and emotional depth of few main characters, while sidelining the community and the holistic aspect that is central in Native American traditions. For example, the characterization of Patrice is detailed when Erdrich describes her: “She did things perfectly when enraged. Her eyes focused, her thoughts narrowed, breathing slowed” (Erdrich, p. 5). This deep dive into Patrice's interiority is partly a reflection of Western narrative expectations, which favors a singular narrative over a collective one. This focus on individual actions is extended to Thomas's daily behaviors, such as when he “positioned himself, did the Palmer Method breathing exercises he had learned in boarding school, and uncapped his pen” (Erdrich, 2020, p. 14). Such attention to Thomas's interior life reflects Erdrich's adoption of a

Westernized narrative approach, which contrasts with Treuer's objection to this framework in Native American literature. As Treuer notes, "Our written literature in English is responsive to a set of historical circumstances, inventive in its evasiveness, rich in its suggestive capabilities, but ultimately it is not culture" (Treuer, 2006, p. 21). This argument highlights the focus on individual experiences and interior voices, which echoes in the selected text. The text also reflects Western influences, which, as Treuer asserts, obscure the communal and oral traditions central to Native American storytelling.

Erdrich also incorporates Western literary genres and conventions, such as realism and historical fiction, in *The Night Watchman*, a move that Treuer critiques for compromising the authenticity of cultural representation. He also claims that there is no concept of the novel in Native American culture. Western literature's intense realism, which focuses on highly detailed, fact-based narratives, is evident in Erdrich's description of the jewel-bearing plant operations: "The women pasted micro-thin slices of ruby, sapphire, or the lesser jewel, garnet, onto thin upright spindles in preparation for drilling" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 3). This meticulous attention to detail, particularly regarding the feminine workplace, is a hallmark of Western literary traditions. Furthermore, Erdrich's use of historical fiction to describe the 1953 congressional bill aimed at dismantling women's workplaces in tribal communities follows Western narrative forms. For example, when Thomas faces political challenges, he declares, "The announcement called for the eventual termination of all tribes, and the immediate termination of five tribes, including the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa" (Erdrich, 2020, n. p.). This historical context is woven into the narrative, reinforcing Treuer's criticism that Native American literature often borrows from Western forms to cater to a reading public familiar with these conventions. Treuer argues that written literature in English, influenced by Western conventions, cannot fully capture the essence of Native American culture. Thus, while Erdrich addresses historically significant issues, her reliance on Western genres and forms may obscure the folk storytelling that lies at the heart of authentic Native American cultural expression.

Treuer believes that modern Native American literary practices lack authenticity, often prioritizing marketability to the Western reader over cultural integrity. In this context, *The Night Watchman* offers an opportunity to evaluate whether the work contains inherent critiques of this issue. Native culture is presented through a Westernized lens, highlighting the tension between cultural authenticity and the marketability of literature. In this way, Erdrich normalizes what is, in essence, the Native American experience for a Western audience. For example, Thomas's strong sense of his own culture is portrayed within a Western-shaped narrative: "His hand was steady. He would start with official correspondence and treat himself, at the end, with letters to his son Archie and daughter Ray. He'd have liked to write to his oldest" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 14). This focus on individual materiality and experience aligns with Western literary forms.

Patrice's character also reflects the Western literary tradition. This is evident in how she attempts to maintain her cultural identity within the framework of modernity: "Patrice had come to think that humans treated the concept of God, or Gizhe Manidoo, or the Holy Ghost childish" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 44). This self-reflective nature is a common feature in Western literature, which typically emphasizes individual effort over collective storytelling. Treuer argues that "What makes the intelligent interrogation of Native American literature difficult is the degree to which the literature has become a central part of an argument about authenticity" (Treuer, 2006, p. 11). According to Haynes (2021), incorporating Native cultural elements within a Westernized narrative structure may be one way the marketability of a novel compromises its cultural authenticity. As Treuer suggests, such blending of traditions might appeal to Western readers, but it fails to capture the community-based, cyclical nature of traditional Native American storytelling.

Treuer's concept of authentic representation in Native American literature should embrace traditional forms of narration. This is evident in his assertion: "Instead of making language jump across the chasm of culture, one should make readers jump over the canyon of difference" (Treuer, 2006, p. 11). He emphasizes that these stories must be connected to the community from which they originate, reflecting their cultural values. In contrast, despite its richness, Erdrich's novel follows a mode of narration that aligns more closely with the Western model. For example, the description, "The lavishness of the venison sandwich reminded him of the poor threads of meat between the thin rounds of gullet that he and his father had eaten, that hard year, on the way to Fort Totten" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 16), can be best understood in the context of Western narrative techniques that focus on vivid character backgrounds and psychological depth, hallmarks of individual experience and internal monologues. These examples suggest that, even though the text is deeply embedded in Native American themes and settings, its narrative technique is heavily influenced by Western literary traditions, straying from the authentic modes of storytelling that Treuer advocates.

Treuer critiques the commodification of Native American literature, arguing that it often becomes more of a marketable product than an authentic cultural expression. He states, "By not taking the literature seriously, by handing out praise where it is not earned, by obscuring the workings of a novel with claims for culture or tradition not supported by the text, we run a great and terrible risk" (Treuer, 2006, p. 4). This critique applies to Erdrich's work, which has garnered significant commercial success and critical acclaim. While *The Night Watchman* highlights important historical and cultural issues, its adherence to Western literary conventions may support Treuer's argument that such works are primarily designed to appeal to a broad, predominantly non-Native audience. For example, the passage, "Thomas left to work on the grave house, hoping to finish it before morning. The other men took turns with the pickaxe and shovel, chipping the grave out of closely bound roots and glassine dirt" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 327-328), follows a chronological sequence of events, which aligns with Western narrative structures. This supports Treuer's claim that such novels, even when deeply rooted in cultural stories, often do not reflect the authenticity of Native American culture. Instead, they are largely shaped by the demands of a non-Native readership.

One of the most significant critiques of contemporary literature on Native American cultures comes from David Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, which argues that Native American culture is often criticized for sacrificing authenticity in favor of profit and marketability. Treuer writes, "The idea that our stories can be manufactured to sell to a mass audience is troubling; they are not mere commodities" (Treuer, 2006, p. 55). According to Niatum (2020), *The Night*

Watchman is filled with such oversimplifications, where even the most complex issues of Native American culture are simplified to make the story more accessible to a Western audience. The storyline is shaped by Western frameworks, which detracts from its true cultural depth. A clear example of this oversimplification can be seen in Erdrich's treatment of the character of Pixie: "The nickname Pixie had stuck to her since childhood, because of her upturned eyes. Since graduating high school, she was trying to train everyone to call her Patrice" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 5). This approach, while making the cultural significance of naming accessible to non-Native readers, diminishes the deeper meanings that are crucial to Native traditions.

Treuer emphasizes the importance of authorship and cultural context, arguing that "[t]o recover books like *Little Tree* are not to say that authorship or authorial identity doesn't matter. It does. It matters especially in the case of Indian fiction and in Indian writing more largely construed" (Treuer, 2006, p. 55). Like much of Erdrich's work, which draws from her own heritage, many aspects of the novel use Western literary sensibilities that Treuer criticizes. For example, in the passage, "Thomas had a new pad of paper from the mercantile, tinted an eye-soothing pale green. His hand was steady" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 14), the portrayal of Thomas Wazhashk's psychological development follows a Western narrative structure that emphasizes individual internal experiences. This approach aligns more with Western literary techniques than with the communal and oral storytelling traditions of Native cultures. Additionally, Erdrich's portrayal of Indianness sometimes comes across as a sensibility or spiritual pose, rather than an authentic lived experience. This tendency is critiqued by Treuer, who highlights that such representations often fail to resonate with Native readers.

The thematic elements in *The Night Watchman* reflect the tension between cultural authenticity and marketability. The development of dramatic tension in the text mirrors the struggle against the termination bill, which is presented, somewhat stereotypically for Western tastes, in a linear dramatic arc that resolves with a climactic moment: "Nobody picked me up down there! No! Why? They knew I wasn't dead in that coffin. I was just kidding" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 163). While this narrative structure may hook the intended Western audience, it simplifies the cyclical and interconnected narratives that are central to Native American literature. In essence, *The Night Watchman* illustrates the modern problem of misrepresentation in Native American writing, as outlined by Treuer. The novel's use of commercial Western literary forms and simplified cultural elements compromises its originality and authenticity. The tension between the demands of the larger Western literary market and the need for cultural representation exposes the challenges of authentically representing Native American culture in literature.

In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich offers a bold interpretation of the struggles and experiences of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. However, much of this authenticity is questioned by Treuer's criticism and ideology. Thematic elements in the selected text are framed within a Western influence, evident in Erdrich's use of symbolism, narrative structure, and character development, all of which align more closely with Western literary conventions. As a result, these elements may dilute the representation of Native culture and its authenticity.

The symbolism in the novel follows a Western literary tradition, where symbolic elements are used to convey deeper ideas. For instance, the evolving identities of the characters are symbolized by descriptions such as, "his face was half white and half gray" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 67). Another example is the figure of the watchman, which carries connotations of vigilance and stewardship, characteristics commonly found in Western symbolism. The watchman, however, is not simply defined by his job; he symbolizes the guardian of his community's future, watching over the well-being of his people. In this broader context, the symbol becomes more palatable to Western literature, where symbols often suggest overarching themes and more universal qualities.

The narrative structure of *The Night Watchman* is another hallmark of Western literary style. The novel follows a clear arc with a defined beginning, middle, and end, driven by conflict and resolution. Treuer critiques this structure, claiming that contemporary Native literature often adopts Western narrative forms, which can undermine cultural integrity: "The structure of a book itself imposes a form that is foreign to traditional Native storytelling methods" (Treuer, 2006, p. 170). The plot, especially Thomas Wazhashk's fight against the termination bill, follows a well-trodden path in Western storytelling, where the plot and character developments are mapped out with clear turning points. For example, "It wasn't something that they kept close track of and in fact Thomas hadn't parsed out his own ancestors—determined who was a quarter or half or three-quarters or full blood" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 405). This structured narrative contrasts sharply with the cyclical and communal storytelling traditions that are central to Native American cultures.

In *The Night Watchman*, character development also reflects a Western approach. Erdrich delves deeply into the backstories and psychological insights of her characters, a technique that is a staple of Western literature. Patrice's inner conflicts and growth are illustrated in the line, "indeed she had nowhere, after her unthinkable short immediate future rolling" (Erdrich, 2020, p. 132). This focus on individual characters' emotional depth and psychological complexity is characteristic of the Western tradition, which often prioritizes personal experience over collective narrative. This emphasis on individualism is at odds with Native storytelling traditions, which tend to focus more on the community.

It has been argued that pressures from the publishing industry and the marketing of literature often push Native writers to conform to Western expectations, sometimes at the expense of authentic cultural representation. As Kemp et al. (2023) note, the push for commercial success often leads to narratives that, while compelling, may lack the true essence of Native traditions. At the same time, Erdrich's intricate character development and action-packed storytelling make her works highly appealing to Western readers. However, this appeal may come at the cost of the communal and oral qualities that are integral to Native storytelling. As Bruton et al. (2022) suggest, the blending of Western and Native literary traditions can either damage the integrity of Native culture or help bridge a connection to it, depending on how it is done. The challenge lies in honoring the authenticity of Native cultural histories while navigating the demands of a predominantly Western literary market.

5. Conclusion

The textual analysis of *The Night Watchman* examines Erdrich's use of Western narrative structures, character development, and symbolism, and how these elements relate to Treuer's critique. While Erdrich's novel addresses important issues of cultural history, the adoption of Western literary conventions presents a risk to the preservation of traditional Native American storytelling practices. The analysis in this essay delves into the complexity and challenges surrounding the definition of authenticity in contemporary Native American writing, especially in the tension between cultural representation and literary form. The findings suggest that while Erdrich's novel succeeds in its cultural impact and relevance, it also exemplifies the tension between marketability and cultural authenticity, a central issue in Treuer's critique.

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