



Reconciling Worlds: Ojibwe Spirituality And Catholicism In Contemporary Native America

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Abstract:

Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose* explores the complex interplay between Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality within the context of cultural and religious conflict. The narrative centres on the tragic accidental killing of a young boy, Dusty, by the Ojibwe Irons family and the subsequent adoption of their son, LaRose, by the grieving Ravich family. This episode, rooted in Ojibwe tradition, fosters healing and reconciliation between the two families. Erdrich delves into the spiritual significance of naming, adoption, and ritual in Ojibwe culture, highlighting how these practices help individuals and communities navigate trauma and traumatic experience. The novel contrasts Ojibwe's holistic approaches to healing with Catholic and Western methods, emphasizing the importance of maintaining cultural traditions in contemporary life.

Keywords:

Ojibwe spirituality, Catholicism, cultural conflict, adoption, naming, rituals, healing, reconciliation.

Louise Erdrich, a famous American writer of French, German, and mixed-blood origin, often explores the relationship between Catholicism and Ojibwe spirituality in her works. Her popularity and critical success have drawn scholarly attention. Researchers increasingly focus on her religious writing, especially the interplay between Catholic and Ojibwe spiritual elements. Erdrich's *LaRose* tells a story of cultural and religious conflict narrated between Natives and whites. Like her other novels, it weaves a seamless tapestry of interconnected tales from family stories, lore, and Ojibwe legends. It powerfully depicts two families' struggle to overcome misfortune.

When the Ojibwe Irons family accidentally kills their neighbour's five-year-old son, Dusty, they turn to Ojibwe spirituality rather than Catholic beliefs to help both families experience trauma. The two families eventually recover and reconcile by practicing Ojibwe traditions. The Ojibwe view adoption as a spiritual act, not just a legal one. It creates new family ties and helps to heal emotional wounds. In *LaRose*, this practice allows both families to share the burden of loss and find a path for forgiveness. The adopted child becomes a bridge between the two families, fostering understanding and reconciliation.

Naming plays a crucial role in Ojibwe spirituality. Names carry power and connect individuals to their ancestors and spiritual heritage. In the novel, the name *LaRose* passes through generations, linking the present to the past and future. This naming tradition helps characters find strength and identity in their cultural roots.

Landreaux and Emmaline Iron, a Native family living on a reservation in rural North Dakota, maintain good relations with Peter and Nola Ravich, who reside in the adjacent blue-collar town. Despite their different religions and lifestyles, the families exchange goods during harvest season. Landreaux works as a physical therapy assistant, guided by both Ojibwe beliefs and Catholic teachings.

Landreaux occasionally hunts. Peace shatters when Landreaux accidentally shoots Peter's five-year-old son, Dusty. This tragedy plunges both families into trauma, breaking the Western nuclear family structure. Seaman (2016) notes, "Erdrich explores the inevitable anguish and complications inherent in this act of sacrifice and attempt of justice, taking soundings of the wellsprings of trauma and strength shaping these grieving households" (p. 19). The shooting accident devastated both families. Though slender and soft, Nola desires blood vengeance. She wishes her husband would "bludgeon Landreaux to death" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 4) to ease her sorrow. The Irons's decision to give their son, LaRose, to the Raviches as compensation shocks both the reservation and the town.

This resolution bewilders the Catholic family. Landreaux and Emmaline also face an embarrassing and traumatic situation. They seek advice from a Catholic priest but to no avail. The Sweat Lodge ritual ultimately guides them. During this practice, the Landreauxs decided to give their youngest son, LaRose, to their innocent neighbors for adoption as reparation, saying, "Our son will be yours" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 16). LaRose becomes a bridge connecting the two families. In Ojibwe tradition, adoption doesn't mean abandonment by one family and a complete takeover by another. It implies joint raising by two families. Though the Irons give their son to the Raviches, they wish to visit him frequently, respecting traditions, cultures, and child-rearing rights.

This arrangement causes both families psychological suffering. However, as time passes, Nola's desire for revenge subsides. She begins to feel LaRose's cuteness when holding him, realizing, "How could she or Peter harm the father of the son they'd been given?" She "closed her eyes and felt the heavy warmth of LaRose as she rocked him to sleep, legs dangling over her legs, breath steaming a passage to the crater of her heart" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 112). From hatred and revenge to reunification and harmony, adoption as an Ojibwe tradition plays a vital role in solving a problem that Western Catholicism and legal justice cannot address. Adoption creates a sense of presence and survival in Ojibwe culture.

It continues Ojibwe spirituality, relocates the world, recognizes interconnectedness, and instils responsibility. Vizenor (2008) states, "Individuals had to be responsible to increase, intensify, spread, recognize, and experience this relationship. And ideally, everyone is responsible for all members of the band, eventually for all people, all things" (p. 18). *LaRose* depicts adoption as common in Ojibwe culture: Romeo gives his son Hollis to the Irons when unable to feed him; Romeo himself was adopted by his aunt. Erdrich once said, "Informal adoption is common in Native American culture, and being temporary parents can be very painful" (Nowick, 1994, p. 73). This mixed family structure preserves tribal benefits, ensures tribal survival, and represents a responsible presence of natural reason and resistance to absence and victory.

LaRose not only describes justice, revenge, desire, and trauma but also touches on the ancient tribal practice of adoption and its benefits for the tribe, family, and siblings. Schultz (1991) asserts, "Naming provides a more important heritage than blood" (p. 85), possessing greater cultural identity. Vizenor (1999) adds, "Names are essential to a distinctive personal nature and bear the memories and solace of heard stories." Names denote identity and status in a tribal settlement. Giving a newborn child a spirit name is a sacred action for both the child and the tribe. The Irons hesitated to name their fourth child LaRose due to its power. After careful thought, Landreaux and Emmaline decided to give their son this name, hoping it would "protect him from the unknown, from what had been let loose with the accident" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 105).

This explains why they gave Junior LaRose to the Raviches as compensation, expecting him to heal their family trauma. History and the past have built a strong foundation for Ojibwe spirituality. The Ojibwe recognize their cultural history and past, realizing the connectivity of their spirituality. Emmaline's family has had a female LaRose in each generation for over a century. This is significant because the Ojibwe culture views females as "powerful, socially, physically, and metaphysically" (Allen, 1986). Since the first rose's birth, each generation's rose has seemed mysterious and powerful. The fifth generation, LaRose, inherits this virtue, possessing a preternaturally soulful healing power like his female ancestors.

LaRose's power stems from both his name and origin, allowing him to survive trauma and preserve Ojibwe traditions. Ojibwe spirituality is mysterious and spiritual, characterized by fluidity, magic, and changeability. It manifests in vision quests, guardian spirits, and dream work. Ojibwe people live in a world of symbols and signs, viewing spirituality and materiality as one. The first Rose, sold by her mother to a white businessman and mistreated, decided to escape. With Wolfred's help, she poisoned the businessman and married Wolfred after few years in boarding school. She survived by seeking vision quests during times of pain and suffering, learning how to survive over in a ruthless situation. Visions always seemed to guide her: "Call upon me when this happens, and you shall live" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 63). Before her death, she passed her survival skills to her daughter, the second LaRose.

First Larose taught her to find guardian spirits, heal people with songs and plants, survive in extreme hunger, set snares, jig fish, and how to dream, return from a dream, change the dream, or stay in the dream to save her life (Erdrich, 2016, p. 199). The second LaRose passed this family power to her daughter, continuing through generations. The story criticizes the boarding school system, an inevitable consequence of Catholic church preaching. Yet, like many Natives, the LaRose family survived and grew stronger. Power travels through bloodlines, giving Junior LaRose a natural ability to heal trauma. He understands his name's importance and knows how to help both families recover.

Larose can travel between visible and invisible worlds and commune with guardian spirits. Once, in a forest, dehydration-induced a trance where he dreamed of Natives speaking Ojibwe. They told him he could fly like them, and he saw Dusty floating in the air. He interpreted this dream using his inherited ancestral power. At Hollis's graduation party, junior LaRose seemed to see Dusty sitting with him. A voice from the air said, "Sorrow eats time. Time eats sorrow" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 371). This echoes the historical trauma of Natives: "Getting blown up happened in an instant; getting put together took the rest of your life" (Erdrich, 2016, p. 11). Unlike Catholicism, Ojibwe spirituality heals the wounds of "loss, dislocation, disease, addiction, and just feeling like the tattered remnants of a people with a complex history" (Seaman, 2016, p. 19).

Ritual plays a crucial role in Native American culture as a form of non-institutionalized spirituality. The Ojibwe define their tribal identity through ceremonies and spiritual practices. These include songs, prayers, dances with drumming, and dramatic language. The wholeness of Native ritual structures defines the universe's completeness. Their spirituality doesn't separate natural from supernatural or material from spiritual. This explains why Native writing traditions often feature supernatural and bizarre phenomena or beings as story characters. Rituals and ceremonies aim to seek help or gain visions through these supernatural entities. Native spirituality permeates daily life as a secular religion. It doesn't focus on ethics, doctrines, or mythology. Instead, it embodies the practice of tribal spirituality and manifests specific traditions. In Ojibwe rituals, medicine men lead healing processes for trauma.

They guide the traumatized to the spiritual world and facilitate healing. These individuals can communicate with birds, animals, plants, and spirits. Through music, herbal plants, dreams, insight, and ritual dance, medicine men balance various powers. Their primary role involves serving the tribe and promoting spiritual healing. After the shooting accident, Landreaux initially sought help from a local Catholic priest, Travis, but failed. He and his wife then turned to their traditional Ojibwe Sweat Lodge ceremony, once led by the medicine man Randall. This ceremony helped Landreaux communicate with spirits and make the final decision to send his son to his victimized neighbor.

Ancient spiritual traditions aimed to heal individuals by transforming their perspectives. In the hot lodge, Emmaline sang an ancient song to invite the soul, while Landreaux called upon the wind and animals. This trance-like state allowed them to recall their ancestors named LaRose, the powerful yet pure name, their traditions, and their son, Junior LaRose. The Sweat Lodge connects traumatized individuals to their souls and spirits, facilitating healing. The pipe ceremony also holds significant healing power. After giving junior LaRose to the Raviches for a year, Landreaux gathered his other four children for a pipe ceremony. Each child received a pipe Landreaux had made during his spare time. The pipe-making process resembles praying.

During the ceremony, participants sit in a circle, passing the pipe while expressing their ideas and wishes. Each person turns the pipe in the four directions, seeking blessings from the spirit. The children believe their youngest brother, LaRose, serves as the savior and healer for both families. Rituals not only heal trauma

from accidental shootings but also aid survival, as seen with the first generation, LaRose and her husband. When Wolfred fell ill after escaping a cruel white businessman, Rose refused to leave him. She used her mother's drum to sing, dance, and pray, hoping supernatural spirits would cure him and ensure their survival. Remarkably, Wolfred recovered.

The novel culminates in a ceremonial graduation party for Hollis, Romeo's natural son and the Irons' adopted son. All characters attend, including Peter, despite feeling strained, wondering if it was a traditional Landreaux ritual. Romeo, who once held a grudge against Landreaux, offers Hollis a checkbook and well wishes. The medicine man Randall brings a hand drum and sings with Landreaux to Hollis. This successful ceremonial graduation party holds great significance for Hollis and the readers. Rituals and ceremonies aim to unite individuals with their surroundings, tribes with others, and humans with the universe. They create and support a sense of community, the foundation of tribal culture. Preserving traditions and continuing rituals and ceremonies heal the injured and guide lost souls. Native American rituals reflect a deep connection to nature and spirituality.

They emphasize the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of maintaining balance in life. These practices often involve natural elements like fire, water, earth, and air, symbolizing the four directions and the cycle of life. Many rituals focus on purification, thanksgiving, and seeking guidance from ancestral spirits. Storytelling plays a vital role in Native American rituals, believing that could foster wisdom and cultural values for generations. These stories often intertwine with ceremonies, creating a rich tapestry of oral tradition and spiritual practice. The power of words and intention in these rituals is believed to have tangible effects on the physical and spiritual worlds. Native American healing rituals often incorporate herbal medicine, demonstrating a profound understanding of local flora and their medicinal properties. These practices reflect a holistic approach to health, addressing physical, mental, and spiritual well-being simultaneously.

The role of the healer or medicine person extends beyond physical ailments, often serving as a spiritual guide and community leader. Erdrich portrays spiritual rituals and ceremonies as essential tools for healing and community bonding. These practices provide a framework for dealing with grief, guilt, and trauma. They create spaces where characters can confront their emotions, seek guidance from spirits, and find collective strength. Through these elements, Erdrich illustrates how Ojibwe spirituality offers a holistic approach to healing that addresses both individual and community needs. She contrasts this with the more individualistic approach of Catholicism, suggesting that Native traditions may be better equipped to handle certain types of trauma and conflict.

In conclusion, *LaRose* powerfully demonstrates the resilience and relevance of Ojibwe spirituality in contemporary life. Erdrich shows how these ancient practices can provide solutions to modern problems, offering a path to healing and reconciliation that respects both individual and community needs. By doing so, she affirms the enduring value of Native American spiritual traditions in a rapidly changing world from their traumatic experience.

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