

Revisiting *Little House on the Prairie* in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*: Hidden Polemic

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Abstract:

This conference paper examines the polemical overtones in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* as an oblique response to Laura Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. It addresses the question of how Erdrich revisits the racialized 'Frontier' narrative against Native Americans in Wilder's novel. It aims to present a Bakhtinian reading to unravel the double-voiced discourse and hidden polemic in *The Birchbark House* against *Little House on the Prairie*. The central line of argument is that Erdrich employs both the standard storytelling strategies used by Wilder herself and innovative ones, unique to Erdrich's personal stylization. Erdrich adopts Wilder's choice of setting, characterization and pencil vignettes, yet going beyond that, she creates a distinguished Native American voice through a circular narrative, a depth in characterization, and a rich Ojibwe oral language. For these ends, I will root my close analytical reading of both novels in Bakhtin's notions of Hidden Polemic and double-voiced discourse.

Keywords: Hidden Polemic, influence, intertextuality, Native American Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) is a children's novel, one out of eight novels in *Little House* series, which explores nineteenth-century American West life built on occupied Osage Indian land. Drawn upon Wilder's own family history, the novel follows the story of little Laura and her family who were part of an illegal rush of settlers into the Midwestern 'Indian territory' in late 1869. The novel embeds the idea of the American West, not as already-settled lands by Native Americans, but as what F.J Turner refers to as Furthermore, the book presents one-sided, inaccurate portrayals and pencil illustrations of Native Americans as savages and animals. This same slice of history is substantially revisited by Louise Erdrich, an acclaimed Native American author in her popular children's novel *The Birchbark House* (1999). It is the first book from a five-book series known as *The Birchbark* series, and it focuses on seven years old Native Ojibwe girl, Omakayas and her family who were forced to move westward to make way to white settlers.

There is a consensus among scholarly works to date that Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* series is a concerted effort to counteract the racist misrepresentations of Indian Americans in Laura Ingalls Wilder's nine volume *Little House on the Prairie* series. In an interview with Hazel Rochman, Erdrich addressed her influence by Wilder's series:

Certainly, they [*Little House* series] were formative for me. I read them as a child, and in re-reading them as an adult, I was shocked to recognize that not only was there no consciousness about the displaced people whose land the newcomers were taking but also that there was a fair amount of racism. In the *Little House* books there are always these moves from place to place. The fact is that any time land was opening up, it was land from which native people were displaced, and in every Ojibwa family there's a similar series of moves (Rochman, 1999, p1427).

To what extent, then, does Erdrich's polemical discourse in *The Birchbark House* go against the grains of the Frontier Myth in *Little House on the Prairie*? This is the keystone question of our research endeavor which begs us to look into the textual evocation of Native American spirit in Erdrich's novel. As a Native American herself, who is descended from the Ojibwa tribe which is part of the Anishinaabeg band, she is able to deliver an authentic account of Native Americans, faithful to the history and culture of the Ojibwa in children's literature.

The historical narrative in *The Birchbark House* stems from Erdrich's own tribe's experiences of forced displacement from their ancestral home in the Great Plains during the mid-to late 1800s. To say that Erdrich merely draws a more equitable portrayal of Native Americans would be an understatement; she endeavors to do away with the dominant white gaze in Frontiers' literature, hence the racial stereotypes and clichés of

American Indians. One of central objectives of this research is to use Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to uncover the layers of double-voiced discourse and hidden polemic in the Erdrich's novel. The two novels have not been specifically approached in the Bakhtinian canons of double-voiced discourse and hidden polemic. The present study coaxes the notion of double-voiced discourse in the context of two literary works engaging with each other through opposing narratives. The hidden polemic is instantiated through the subversive narrative perspective that Erdrich weaves in *The Birchbark House* in order to correct the flatline, racist depictions of Native Americans in *Little House* in a culturally authentic manner.

2. Review of Literature

The Birchbark House and *Little House on the Prairie* have been individually examined by several critics from a wide variety of critical perspectives; primarily through feminist and ecocritical lenses. However, there is not enough scholarship which involves a comparative study between them; precisely from the angle of Bakhtin's Dialogism. The existing comparative literature only highlights the clash between the two novels in a non-Bakhtinian mode of thought. In "Razing Little Houses, or Re-envisionary History: Louise Erdrich's story of the American Frontier in *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*", Gretchen Papazian examines how Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* series is a re-writing of Wilder's concept of home from the indigenous vantage point. She analyzed *The Birchbark House* from the perspective of the "New Western History" theory which recognizes the American West as a home for the Native Americans. She compared the theme of house and home in both novels. My research takes a different direction where it touches on the literary strategies through which Erdrich crafts her hidden polemic and double-voiced discourse against Wilder's novel.

The chapter titled "Language Revitalization, Anishinaabemowin, and Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* Series" by Margaret Noodin from the book *Frontiers in American Children's Literature* (2016) gestures towards the relationship between *The Birchbark House* and *Little House* but it puts much of the emphasis on the significance of the Anishinaabemowin language in Erdrich's novel. My study; however, situates the use of Native language by Erdrich as a heteroglossic feature of her internal polemic. In the same aforementioned book, another chapter titled "Shoring up The Birchbark House" by Anne K. Phillips outlines the similarities between the novels under study with the intent to create a classroom experience for her students in order to learn more about the less popular novel than *Little House*, that is, *The Birchbark House* and to gain insights about the genuine representation of native Indians in Erdrich's novel. Whilst my approach is not pedagogical, there are useful referential points of comparison which establish my argument on the hidden polemic.

3. Double-Voiced Disourse and Hidden Polemic in Bakhtinian Dialogism

Language, according to Mikhail Bakhtin is never neutral, but is

inherently “dialogic” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.280) in the sense that every utterance actively responds to another speaker’s utterance. Any form of discourse is therefore the medium of dialogic imagination. Central to his description of the discourse is the idea of double-voiced discourse. This aspect is propounded in his seminal work *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) where he exemplifies the form of the novel, as a prompting dialogic speech, as the author’s intentions refracted only indirectly by the words he puts in his characters’ mouths. Another aspect of Bakhtin’s dialogics, which is of particular interest to our study, appears in his discussions of the double-voiced speech, a term he uses to describe irony or parody, or words used in quotation marks. A double-voiced discourse contains two meanings: a literal or monologic meaning, that is, a dictionary definition, and an implied or dialogic meaning, intended to respond, and throw barbs at the other’s discourse. To put in a nutshell, a double-voiced discourse is a speech about another’s speech. This is especially true when the responsive literary discourse becomes polemicized with the other’s discourse.

According to Bakhtin’s theory, the overt polemic and the hidden polemic are two constitutive subtypes of double-voiced speech. Polemic in a broad sense, is a critical discourse in which a person attacks or advocate someone’s opinion. Overt polemic, on one hand, is when a discourse is openly polemicized with the hostile speech. Internally polemical discourse or Hidden polemic, on the other hand, is defined by Bakhtin as a “the word with a sideward glance at someone else’s hostile word” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 196). This definition has been interpreted differently from one scholar to another, which allows us to extend the spectrum of interpretations to implicate a context in which a literary work is internally polemical with another one. It is a discourse directed toward a referential object in the opponent’s discourse, recognizing it and only indirectly respond to it. In other words, the hidden dialogism of the discourse therefore, is created between the utterance and another antagonistic utterance, and a polemical blow is struck at the other’s discourse on the same theme, at the other’s statement about the same object. Bakhtin also describes the polemic as a hidden anti-stylization of someone else’s style where an author’s idiosyncratic style can influence another’s, either to imitate it or to subvert it.

Analogous to the idea of hidden polemic is heteroglossia and chronotope, which are both modes of dialogism. In the case of heteroglossia, Bakhtin argues that the coexistence of linguistic varieties in a single discourse serves to express polemical intentions of the writer but in a refracted manner (Bakhtin, 1984, p.324). More significantly, double-voicedness in literary discourse makes its presence felt by the author in the case of heteroglossia of language (ibid, p.327). Bakhtin introduced the concept of ‘chronotope’ (literally means "time space") to denote the significance of time- space configurations in literature; defined it in his terms as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.84). Although

the concept carries conceptual ambiguities, it is still one interesting ground to explore intertextual relationships between similar chronotopic settings in the novels under analysis and to denude the polemical significance this similarity brings forth.

4. Erdrich's Sideward Glance on *Little House on the Prairie*

4.1 Depth in Characterization.

The main characters in *Little House* has their parallels in *The Birchbark*, but a twist in the characterization in the latter is deliberate. The Ingalls family in *Little House* consists of Pa, Ma, little Laura and her older sister Mary and baby Carrie; corresponding pretty much to the Ojibwe family: Omakayas, Deyday (her father), Yellow Kettle (her mother), her older sister and brother Angeline and Big Pinch, and baby Neewo. Nonetheless, Erdrich draws significant differences between a settler family and an Ojibwa family. While the former consists of only immediate family members due to the rugged individualistic mindset that fostered this small-scale family pattern in the so-called early pioneer settlers, the latter preserved its large-scale family, including grandparents, uncles and aunts, living all together in one communal environment among other tribes. Nokomis is the maternal grandmother of Omakayas who plays an important role in passing on knowledge and ancestral wisdom to her grandchildren. Her presence in the novel adds warmth and comfort to the familial atmosphere. This distinction in characterization implies a polemical response to Wilder's depiction of Native Americans as uncivilized savages; scattered in wild lands, void of any familial connections.

In the same vein, Wilder's novel is not colored by any dynamic, round characters, unlike the major characters in *The Birchbark* who have a fully-fleshed profile and change through the course of the novel by the effect of temporal-spacial landscape, a point which will be discussed in more details momentarily. Also, we notice a hidden polemic in Erdrich's creation of the antagonist in *The Birchbark*. Where she could have chosen the white settlers as the main antagonist, in the same manner Wilder did with the Native Americans, Erdrich rather sets the small pox epidemic brought by the white settlers as the central antagonist. This contagious disease, which was carried by a European visitor during one of Ojibwa's Powwow carnivals snuffs out the lives of many characters in the novel, including Baby Neewo. In fact, the endemic was also behind decimating all of Omakayas's biological family. Therefore, the detrimental impact of white colonizers was revealed through the deadly march of diseases on native population, killing nine out of ten people. Wilder chose to just ignore this tragic fact, and focused instead on the seasonal infections that affected the white characters, and ironically had the white characters suspect the natives to have caused them the diseases.

4.2 Hidden Polemic in Chronotope

When reading both novels concurrently, one can observe a dialogic relationship between space and time as a result of the intertextual

connection between the two novels. Both narratives ostensibly share a 'chronotopic' frame. We can argue that Erdrich emulates the unique chronotope of *Little House* in her novel by way of stepping into a hidden, internal polemic. In vicinity with Wilder's time-space settings, Erdrich features the Midwest during the mid-nineteenth century from which the Frontier narrative thrived, although *Birchbark* takes place twenty years earlier. The choice of this particular period is essential for Erdrich to dismantle the myth of Frontiers and flip it upside down in favor of the historically misunderstood Native Americans.

In *Little House*, the Frontier consciousness drives the entire narrative and is manifested whenever the topic about the land and Native Americans is brought up. For little Laura's family, land is merely an exotic wild space ready to be settled. When Laura asks her father about the 'Indian Territory' which is illegally occupied by them, he goes on with preaching westward-expansion ideas, condescendingly replies: "When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That's why we're here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick" (Wilder, 1953, p. 272).

Erdrich's comeback on this imperialistic western imagination hinges on emphasizing the significance of space for the Natives both spiritually and environmentally. For Native Americans, space is cognate with identity, and not an area to be constantly stretched out for geopolitical and progressive goals. The so-called Wild West is rather a home and a life-sustaining habitat for Indian Americans, and should be cared for and protected, not ravished and abused. Erdrich expresses her polemic through Deyday's words, marveling at the white man's avidity for land: "They are like greedy children. Nothing will ever please them for long... Not until they have it all...All of our lands." (Erdrich, 1999, pp 79-80). The fear of removal westward haunted their lives; every conversation between the members of the Ojibwa tribe cannot be complete without discussing the problem of the relocation. Fishertail, who is a friend of Deyday, addressed the dilemma: "West is where the spirits of the dead walk. If the whites keep chasing us west, we'll end up in the land of the spirits" (ibid, p79). His words made Deyday silent in apprehension. Therefore, Erdrich's re-envisioning the agenda of the frontier as a herald of destruction not construction; underscores two divergent ways of thinking in both novels.

As already mentioned, over the course of *Little House* Pa, Ma, Laura and Mary remained static as ever, unchanged by time and space. Erdrich, nevertheless; renders chronotope in *The Birchbark House* influential on the characters 'development; attributing dynamic traits and depth to their identity. The narrative structure is divided into four sections each titled after a season, Neebin(Summer), Dagwaging (Fall), Biboon (Winter), respectively. As *The Birchbark House* plot unfolds, Omakayas grows up by the seasonal cycle of time and the tribal space, i.e. the land. The Ojibwe-inhabited island in Wisconsin. In Ojibwe culture, age is not defined by the number of lived years

but by how many deadly-cold winters one has survived in the wild lands. When the plot reaches its full cycle, that is, over the period of four seasons, Omakayas turns eight winters. By this time, another winter has passed and another survival test has passed.

4.3 Bashing the Stereotypes

4.3.1 Appropriation of Native Oral Language

With Wilder's erasure of the Native Americans' identity as preexistent inhabitants of the Great Plains and lakes, the matter of language takes no exception. *Little House* portrays Native Americans speaking no formal language, only uttering unintelligible harsh sounds and wild grunts "The Indian made two short, harsh sounds in his throat. The other Indian made one sound, like "Hah!"(Wilder, 1953, p.140) "Hi! Hi! Hi-yi! Hah! Hi! Hah!" (ibid,273). Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* offers a corrective to this stereotype insofar as she appropriates the Ojibwemowin, the oral language of the Ojibwe people in English-syntactic narrative of the novel. Her use of written Ojibwe words underlines the double-voiced aspect of heteroglossia and a twofold internal polemic. From one side, Erdrich destabilizes the stereotype of Native Americans' lack of linguistic accessibility, and from the other side, she works to preserve the oral language and revitalizes it in the contemporary era. The narrative is populated with Ojibwe everyday words that are easy for a child reader to remember such as daga, ayah, ahneen which translate to please, yes, and hello. Moreover, Erdrich makes sure that her readers understand every Ojibwe word by annotating a glossary in the end of her novel.

4.3.2 Native American Culture is not savagery

Indoctrinated by the myths of Frontier and the pervasive belief in Manifest Destiny, the Ingalls family in *Little House* perceived the Native Americans as inferior, and in need of embracing the white man's civilization and culture. Erdrich displays the rich culture and traditions of the Ojibwe in artistically expressive and semantic manners; both ways entail some form of polemical, double-voiced discourse. Not only does she make use of vivid description of cultural customs that Ojibwe people practice such as harvesting food for the dire wintertime and celebrating the Powwow carnival, but also, she resorts to pencil drawings to rectify the problematic portraits of Native Americans in Wilder's novel who were portrayed as sexualized predators, naked, stinky interlopers and hungry thieves. Erdrich draws what a real Native American look like, (as shown in figure 1). She pictures Deyday wearing a modest Ojibwe -style clothing: "full turban, beaded velvet vest, calico shirt of fine red cloth, a bandolier bag, and earrings. He always wore a least on fancy earring" (Erdrich, 1999, p.51). This image lies in stark contrast with Wilder's depiction of native Indians. She describes their appearances through the eyes of little Laura (as illustrated in figure 2): "First she saw their leather moccasins. Then their stringy, bare, red-brown legs, all the way up. Around their waists each of

the Indians wore a leather thong, and the furry skin of a small animal hung down in front ... Their faces were bold and fierce and terrible”. (Wilder, 1953, p.138). This short passage captures the perpetuating unjustified misconception and fear of native Americans as savage Other. The disparate linguistic and cultural differences between the natives and Euro-American settlers allowed such racial stereotyping pattern to seep through the colonial literature. Driven by these false depictions, Erdrich created the pencil vignettes as a form of polemical response to the demeaning drawings of Native Americans in *Little House*.

Fig.1. Erdrich’s culturally authentic drawing of a Native American man.



Source (Erdrich, 1999, p.53).

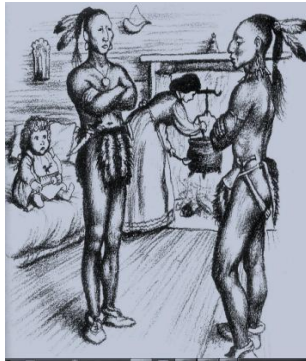


Fig.2. Wilder’s stereotypical view of a ‘savage’ Indian.

Source (Wilder, 1935, p.139).

5. CONCLUSION

The present research advances the argument that Louise Erdrich's narrative poetics is charged with hidden polemic against Laura Ingalls Wilder's whitewashed narrative of the American Frontier in *Little House on the Prairie*. Marginalizing the history and identity of Native Americans, glossing over the incriminating actions committed by the white people, and painting inhuman stereotypes are the main referential points in Wilder's discourse that Erdrich attempts to undermine. Drawing on Bakhtin's principle of double-voiced discourse and its various characteristics, this research unravels hidden polemical discourse in *The Birchbark House* through aspects of chronotope and heteroglossia. The literary merit of Erdrich's novel lies in its resistance to the western popular myths of Frontier and Manifest destiny, which also initiates the critique of other myths that informed racism against the Native Americans throughout history. Drawn from the limitation of my research, captivity narrative, which is rife with Frontier-informed propaganda, is a scope for further research prospects which lack current literary support and scholarship. To a great extent, novels inspired by captivity narratives are a useful genre which lay bare the mechanisms of colonial racism against Native Indians.

6. References

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