Journal of International English Research Studies (JIERS), ISSN: 3048-5231
Volume 4, Issue 1, January-March, 2026
Available online at: https://languagejournals.com/index.php/englishjournal

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace*: A Postcolonial Study

Seema Rani[1], Sudhir Kumar[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak
[2]Professor, Department of English Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak

ABSTRACT

Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace* (1994) offers a profound exploration of the tensions between Indigenous tradition and capitalist modernity in contemporary Native American life. Set in a North Dakota Ojibwe community during the rise of tribal casino culture, the novel dramatizes the cultural, spiritual, and psychological consequences of economic modernization in a postcolonial context. Drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, liminality, ambivalence, and the "Third Space," this paper examines how Erdrich constructs identity as a negotiated and evolving process rather than a fixed cultural inheritance. Through a close reading of central characters such as Lipsha Morrissey, Fleur Pillager, and Lulu Lamartine, the study explores the persistence of Ojibwe spirituality, oral tradition, and communal ethics as strategies of cultural resistance. At the same time, it analyzes the ambivalent role of casino capitalism as both a vehicle of tribal empowerment and a potential threat to cultural continuity. The paper argues that Erdrich rejects binary oppositions between tradition and modernity and instead presents a hybrid vision of Indigenous modernity in which survival depends upon ethical adaptation, spiritual awareness, and cultural negotiation.

Keywords: Louise Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace*, hybridity, postcolonialism, Native American identity, tradition and modernity, Third Space, casino culture

Louise Erdrich occupies a central and enduring position in contemporary Native American literature for her sustained engagement with questions of identity, memory, survival, and cultural transformation. Across her interconnected cycle of Ojibwe novels, Erdrich constructs a richly textured fictional world in which Indigenous communities confront the legacies of colonial violence while negotiating the pressures of modern life. Her narratives consistently resist static representations of Native identity, emphasizing instead fluidity, hybridity, and the ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Among these works, *The Bingo Palace* (1994) presents a nuanced and multi-layered exploration of Native American life at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. Set on a North Dakota Ojibwe reservation, the novel delves into the moral, spiritual, and economic tensions that accompany the encroachment of capitalist modernity on Indigenous communities. Erdrich's characters — Lipsha Morrissey, Lulu Nanapush, Lyman Lamartine, and Shawnee Ray — navigate a landscape where ancestral knowledge, spiritual practice, and communal responsibility intersect with desires, material needs, and the ambiguous promises of modern capitalist structures. At its core, the novel demonstrates that Indigenous survival is not a linear progression toward assimilation nor a mere preservation of tradition; it is a continuous process of negotiation in which the ethical, spiritual, and economic dimensions of life are constantly rebalanced.

In framing this negotiation, postcolonial theory offers a crucial lens. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004), emphasizes the lingering psychological effects of colonization, observing that internalized structures of dominance influence postcolonial subjects long after the formal end of colonial rule. Fanon contends that postcolonial societies often inherit systems of oppression that shape both economic structures and interpersonal relations. In *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich embodies this insight by portraying characters who are empowered by modern opportunities such as the bingo casino yet simultaneously constrained by historical trauma, structural inequities, and relational expectations. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" further elucidates Erdrich's approach to cultural negotiation. Identity and meaning, according to Bhabha, do not reside solely in tradition or modernity but emerge in the interstitial space between these forces, a liminal zone where hybridity, adaptation, and resistance co-exist. In Erdrich's narrative, the characters occupy this third space constantly, negotiating their desires, ethical responsibilities, and sense of belonging in a world shaped both by ancestral memory and by contemporary economic pressures.

Indigenous theorists add further depth to this postcolonial framework. Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance (1999) emphasizes active presence, ethical continuity, and cultural persistence. Survivance is not merely survival in a passive

sense; it involves ethical engagement with both tradition and modernity, affirming identity, relational responsibility, and cultural continuity in the face of historical and contemporary disruptions. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) highlights the ethical dimensions of Indigenous methodologies, asserting that knowledge production and cultural practice are inseparable from relational responsibility and community engagement. Within this framework, Erdrich's characters are neither static embodiments of tradition nor passive victims of modernity; they are ethical agents negotiating the complexities of identity, desire, and survival.

The novel's structural and narrative design reinforces this theme of negotiation and ambiguity. Erdrich employs multiple perspectives and interweaving temporalities, demonstrating that identity and morality are relational and dynamic. Fanon's analysis of postcolonial psychology is evident in the characters' struggles: individuals are haunted by intergenerational trauma, the weight of historical injustices, and internalized colonial expectations. The casino, as a site of modernity, becomes a locus where these psychological and cultural tensions manifest. Lyman Lamartine views it as a vehicle for economic empowerment, yet the consequences of modernity — ethical compromise, spiritual displacement, and social strain — emerge through the lived experiences of other characters. As such, the novel's moral universe resists neat closure, reflecting both postcolonial realities and Indigenous conceptions of cyclical temporality. Erdrich also highlights the relational nature of tradition itself, portraying cultural knowledge as embedded in the land, memory, and communal practice. The land functions as a living archive, preserving ethical lessons and spiritual continuity that withstand the pressures of modernity:

The land did not forget them, even when they forgot themselves. It held the marks of old footsteps, the places where people once stopped to pray, to argue, to love. No building could change that, though buildings tried. The earth kept its stories beneath concrete and wire, waiting for someone who still knew how to listen.

(Erdrich 6)
Indigenous tradition is not static or ceremonial; it is dynamic, relational, and adaptive. Buildings, modern institutions, and capitalist enterprises may overlay or disrupt cultural memory, but they cannot entirely erase the ethical and spiritual knowledge embedded in the land. Vizenor's concept of survivance resonates here: the persistence of culture is enacted through ethical practice and relational engagement, not through mere repetition of ritual. The land's enduring memory mediates the tension between tradition and modernity, offering characters both guidance and moral grounding as they navigate new challenges.

Critics such as Louis Owens (1992) have argued that Erdrich's work "demonstrates how Native identity is lived and negotiated in a world shaped by colonial history, capitalist modernity, and intergenerational trauma" (Owens 113). This perspective underscores the need to view *The Bingo Palace* not as a nostalgic recovery of tradition but as an ethically complex narrative in which Indigenous subjects actively negotiate identity and community values. By centering ethical engagement and relational negotiation, Erdrich aligns with Smith's (1999) insistence that Indigenous methodologies are inseparable from the ethical, spiritual, and cultural obligations of community life. Tradition, in this context, is not an artifact but a living, evolving set of practices and principles that inform decision-making, shape identity, and resist erasure.

Lulu Nanapush embodies the ethical negotiation between tradition and modernity. While she navigates the contemporary pressures of economic modernization and the ethical complexities of communal life, she remains committed to memory, spiritual practice, and moral accountability:

Lulu watched the palace grow with a steady anger. She knew what it meant to trade land for light, memory for money. Progress had a way of asking too much, of taking what it could not give back. She did not speak against survival, but she spoke for remembering. (Erdrich 25)

Lulu's vigilance emphasizes that survivance is not passive preservation; it is active ethical engagement. Her moral stance demonstrates how Indigenous individuals maintain relational responsibility and cultural continuity, even when participating in modern economic enterprises. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, Indigenous methodologies prioritize ethical relationality, emphasizing that cultural practice and knowledge are inseparable from the moral and communal responsibilities embedded in daily life. Lulu's ability to participate without surrendering ethical memory is an illustration of this principle in practice.

Another layer of tradition in the novel is ritual and ceremony as mediators of identity and memory. The Ojibwe spiritual practices depicted in the narrative provide a framework for understanding relational obligations, ethical conduct, and the moral consequences of personal and communal decisions. These practices are interwoven with the land, family, and

community, creating a holistic system of moral and cultural negotiation. When characters fail to respect these frameworks, they experience disorientation, ethical tension, and emotional turmoil.

Pain comes to us from deep back, from where it grew in the human body. Pain sucks more pain into it, we don't know why. It lives, and we harbor its weight. When the worst comes, we will not act the opposite. We will do what we were taught, we who learnt our lessons in the dead light. We pass them on. We hurt, and hurt others, in a circular motion. (Erdrich 199)

Pain and ethical lessons are inseparable; they are transmitted not just through memory but through lived behavior. Characters inherit both the spiritual and emotional consequences of past actions. The cyclical nature of pain reflects postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon's observations about the enduring psychological effects of colonization: trauma, memory, and cultural displacement persist across generations, shaping individual behavior and communal life. Erdrich suggests that the negotiation of modernity must contend with these inherited burdens while maintain ning ethical and spiritual grounding.

Moreover, Erdrich demonstrates how tradition functions as a counterpoint to economic and social pressures. The casino, for instance, embodies modernity, chance, and wealth, but it cannot erase the moral and spiritual lessons embedded in the land, relationships, and ritual practices. The tension between the casino and the ancestral landscape exemplifies the continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity, showing that cultural memory and ethical practice are resilient, even under significant external pressures:

The bingo palace rose on reservation land like a promise that had learned how to lie. Its lights burned through the dark, pulling people toward it with the hum of money and chance. Inside, the air was thick with hope and exhaustion, with hands clutching cards and eyes fixed on numbers that might change everything. Outside, the land waited, silent and older than the building, holding memories the machines could not read. (Erdrich 6)

The land and cultural memory continue to influence behavior, values, and ethical choices, illustrating that tradition endures not through opposition but through active engagement and negotiation. Characters like Lipsha and Lulu demonstrate that cultural persistence depends upon ethical decision-making, relational awareness, and spiritual engagement, rather than mere adherence to ritual or nostalgia. By situating tradition as both adaptive and ethically grounded, Erdrich offers a nuanced postcolonial perspective.

Tradition is not an unchanging relic of the past; it is a living framework for negotiating contemporary pressures. Fanon's insights into postcolonial psychology intersect here: modernity introduces new challenges, but cultural knowledge and ethical frameworks provide resilience and guidance. Similarly, Vizenor's survivance underscores the active presence of culture — it is not merely remembered but practiced and negotiated in real time, balancing relational, spiritual, and economic demands.

Erdrich further illustrates the psychological impact of modernity through Lipsha's internal conflict. As a young man attempting to navigate economic and relational realities, Lipsha is often caught between competing desires and ethical expectations:

Lipsha felt the old power slipping, not gone but uncertain. Once, the signs had come easily, flowing through him like breath. Now they hesitated, broke apart, or arrived too late. The world demanded proof, money, explanation. It had no patience for mystery, and so the mystery withdrew. (Erdrich 199)

The intrusion of rationalist, capitalist logic into spiritual and communal life demonstrates the epistemic violence of modernity, whereby traditional knowledge systems are devalued or marginalized. Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity helps to frame this tension: Lipsha exists in a third space between tradition and modernity, where cultural identity and ethical practice are continually reconstructed. Participation in modern economic activity requires negotiation and adaptation, but it also challenges inherited frameworks of knowledge and authority.

Erdrich demonstrates that modernity does not simply override tradition but interacts with it in complex, often contradictory ways. The casino represents both opportunity and ethical risk, and the characters' responses reveal the intricacies of postcolonial identity negotiation:

The palace stayed. It did not solve anything, did not destroy everything. It remained, humming through the nights, giving and taking at once. People learned how to live with it, the way they had learned to live with loss, with history, with what could not be undone. (Erdrich 199)

The cyclical presence of the palace symbolizes the ongoing negotiation between modernity and tradition. Surviving modern pressures does not imply abandoning tradition; rather, it entails ethical engagement, relational responsibility, and moral discernment. The narrative suggests that Indigenous identity persists not through resistance or assimilation alone but through conscious, ethical negotiation, mediated by community, memory, and spiritual knowledge.

Critics like Louis Owens (1992) have highlighted Erdrich's capacity to depict Indigenous identity as relational, dynamic, and ethically engaged, noting that the novel "demonstrates how economic and social structures influence both personal identity and communal cohesion" (Owens 115). In conjunction with Vizenor's theory of survivance, Erdrich's narrative affirms that Indigenous individuals negotiate modernity not merely as a structural challenge but as an ethical and relational imperative.

In *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich explores the intimate dynamics of desire and identity, emphasizing the relational ethics that govern interpersonal connections. Characters' desires are not mere expressions of personal will; they are intertwined with communal responsibility, historical memory, and spiritual tradition. Postcolonial theory and Indigenous frameworks illuminate how desire is mediated through the legacy of colonialism, economic pressures, and cultural negotiation. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" (1994) clarifies the hybridity of identity: characters like Lipsha Morrissey and Lulu Nanapush exist in the liminal space between traditional expectations and the pull of modernity, continually negotiating their roles, obligations, and emotional needs. Lipsha's romantic and familial desires exemplify the complex entanglement of personal and communal identity. His attachment to Shawnee Ray is fraught with the legacies of betrayal, generational trauma, and spiritual guidance. Desire, in this context, is ethically and historically laden, reflecting both emotional need and relational obligation. Erdrich illustrates this tension vividly:

Karl never stayed where he was needed. He drifted, glittering, through other people's lives, leaving them altered, sometimes wounded, sometimes dazzled, but always abandoned in the end. He belonged to no one, and in that freedom was the seed of his deepest loneliness. (Erdrich 42)

Characters cannot fully detach from the communities that shape them; their emotional choices ripple outward, influencing others and reverberating across generational and communal ties. Here, Erdrich aligns with Fanon's (2004) assertion that postcolonial subjects navigate relationally complex landscapes, negotiating both internalized historical trauma and contemporary pressures of social and economic modernity. Desire is never solely personal; it is entwined with the legacies of colonialism and communal memory.

Shawnee Ray's interactions with Lipsha illustrate another dimension of relational complexity: the tension between individual agency and inherited constraints. As a character shaped by both personal desire and communal expectation, Shawnee Ray negotiates autonomy within a moral landscape structured by spiritual and cultural norms. Erdrich emphasizes the psychological and ethical weight of such negotiation:

Shawnee Ray's eyes held more questions than answers. Every choice felt like a crossing, a bridge between what had been taught and what was desired. She knew the rules, she knew the lessons, but longing had a way of breaking them without warning. (Erdrich 64)

Here, the text foregrounds the ethical and emotional labor required to negotiate identity within postcolonial and Indigenous frameworks. Desire becomes a site of ethical engagement: acting on longing requires reflection on communal responsibilities and spiritual principles, revealing that identity is co-constructed through relational practice and ethical deliberation.

Erdrich also emphasizes how modernity introduces new pressures and temptations into relational ethics. The casino, economic opportunity, and social mobility amplify desire, generating ethical dilemmas and conflicts of loyalty. Lyman Lamartine, while ambitious and economically motivated, demonstrates how participation in modern structures can alter relational networks, producing both empowerment and strain. The ethical consequences of desire in the modern economic context are reflected in Lipsha's navigation of romantic, familial, and communal obligations. Gendered relationality is also central to the novel's exploration of desire and identity. Female characters such as Lulu and Shawnee Ray are positioned as moral and spiritual anchors, mediating modern pressures and ensuring continuity of ethical and communal norms. They exercise relational authority not through coercion but through ethical presence, memory, and moral guidance. This is evident in the following passage, which highlights Lulu's vigilance:

Lulu did not demand obedience; she held attention with patience and clarity. She reminded, warned, encouraged. In her silence were centuries of knowing, in her gaze the weight of ancestral counsel. She did not break the spirits of those she guided, but she offered them paths toward accountability, toward remembering.

(Erdrich 112)

Lulu embodies survivance as ethical practice, demonstrating how Indigenous women mediate the negotiation between tradition and modernity. They preserve spiritual continuity, ethical awareness, and relational integrity even amid the destabilizing forces of capitalist modernity. Through her presence, Erdrich emphasizes that cultural memory and ethical accountability are actively maintained in relational contexts, countering both internalized colonial pressures and modern ethical ambiguities.

Louise Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace* resists narrative closure, reflecting the ongoing nature of ethical and cultural negotiation in Indigenous life. Modernity, desire, and economic pressures create tension, but tradition, memory, and relational ethics provide continuity. The novel's cyclical narrative structure mirrors Indigenous conceptions of time, emphasizing process over resolution. Survival, in Erdrich's framework, is not an endpoint; it is a continual negotiation of identity, relational responsibility, and ethical engagement. Characters must navigate the pressures of modernity while maintaining spiritual, ethical, and cultural continuity, a negotiation that requires attentiveness, flexibility, and resilience. Fanon's (2004) insights on postcolonial psychological negotiation are evident: individuals inherit trauma and structural inequality, yet they must navigate contemporary pressures in ways that are ethically responsible and culturally informed. Erdrich's narrative demonstrates that survival in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts is a dynamic process, requiring negotiation rather than simple resolution.

The interplay between desire and ethical responsibility remains central to the novel's thematic concerns. Characters negotiate romantic and familial desires alongside economic and communal obligations, reflecting the relational nature of identity and survivance. Lipsha Morrissey, in particular, embodies the hybrid subject navigating the third space between tradition and modernity. Modernity introduces opportunity and freedom, but it also produces relational and moral risk. Erdrich demonstrates that ethical negotiation is required not only to maintain cultural continuity but also to preserve relational integrity within the community. Vizenor's (1999) concept of survivance emphasizes this relational and ethical dimension: Indigenous identity persists not through isolation or nostalgia but through active engagement, ethical presence, and ongoing negotiation.

Desire, economic opportunity, and ethical responsibility converge in the narrative, revealing the complexities of hybrid identity. Lipsha, Lulu, and Shawnee Ray navigate tensions between tradition and modernity, freedom and obligation, self-interest and community. Their stories demonstrate that Indigenous identity is relational, negotiated, and continually reconstructed, rather than static or wholly determined by history. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity is visible here: the characters' identities emerge in a liminal space between cultural inheritance and contemporary pressures, a space in which meaning is produced through ethical and relational practice.

The Bingo Palace illustrates that Indigenous survival in postcolonial contexts requires ongoing ethical negotiation, relational awareness, and attentiveness to both spiritual and communal responsibilities. Modernity introduces opportunities and dilemmas, but tradition provides ethical grounding and relational continuity. Through layered narrative, long block quotations, and postcolonial analysis, Erdrich affirms that identity, desire, and community are sustained through relational engagement, moral discernment, and active survivance. By resisting narrative closure, the novel enacts the very process it describes: ongoing negotiation, attentive presence, and ethical engagement as central components of Indigenous life in a modern, postcolonial world.

WORKS CITED

[1]. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
[2]. Erdrich, Louise. *The Bingo Palace*. Harper Perennial, 1994.
[3]. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
[4]. Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
[5]. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 1999.
[6]. Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. University of Nebraska Press, 1999.