

Varieties of Strong Women in *The Birchbark House* Series

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1. Introduction

Louise Erdrich is most famous for her adult novels like *The Night Watchman* (2020), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2021, but she has also been writing for children her *Birchbark House* series. As Susan Castillo says, “In novels by ... Native American women writers, we can encounter ... portrayals of Indian women as figures of strength and power. Some of this phenomenon can be found in the texts of Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich.” In both her novels for adults and her novels for children, Erdrich explores the complexity of human nature and American culture, including Native American culture, which means that she does not write characters who are all strong in the same way. This paper will explain the varieties of strong female characters in *The Birchbark House* series.

2. Female Characters in Erdrich’s Fiction

Omakayas, who is the female Ojibwe protagonist of the first three *Birchbark House* books, is surely a character of power and strength. Omakayas is so sensitive to nature that she can hear plants talking and can communicate with animals like bears. In the first book, she gains a spirit guide who is a bear woman. She has inner strength like a bear’s and powerful dreams which save her father’s and brother’s lives. After she bravely takes some of a living eagle’s feathers, her father says, “You have done something, that a warrior does. This is something that only grown men do. And you are just a little girl” (*Porcupine* 53). In the fourth and fifth books, Omakayas becomes the mother of twins Chickadee and Makoons and is the loving and caring core of the family.

In *The Birchbark House* series Erdrich depicts multiple strong female characters who have important influences on Omakayas’ development. There are, for instance, traditionally feminine strong women, like her grandmother Nokomis, who is wise, brave, and respected, the spirit of the whole family. As the family storyteller, Nokomis is a vital figure for transmitting traditional Ojibwe tales and lessons about nature, life, and the world to the next generation. Nokomis shares her knowledge with Omakayas to help her become a strong woman.

Some other strong female characters in *The Birchbark House* series are independent, brave, and powerful and fill traditionally male roles, while having a profound influence on Omakayas. The family friend Old Tallow, for example, saved Omakayas from the small-pox ravaged Spirit Island and sacrifices herself to hunt a huge bear to save Omakayas’ family from starvation. Also, in the second book, when Omakayas’ younger brother Pinch is left alone on an island, Old Tallow goes to find him, “paddling as expertly as the strongest warrior” (*Game* 86). Old Tallow has a man’s strength and power.

However, Old Tallow also has feminine characteristics. For example, in book one, she takes care of Nokomis and Omakayas during a smallpox epidemic. She always shows her generous love to Omakayas like a mother or like the Auntie Omakayas calls her. In book three, she shows her kindness and tenderness to two white children whose parents have been killed in a fire. Thus, she has both traditional feminine and masculine traits. She wears an old blue dress, but “she tucked her braids up underneath a man’s hat” (*Birchbark* 22). Old Tallow’s independent, wise, manly and womanly character plays a vital role for Omakayas.

Also, strong and powerful women play important roles in Erdrich’s adult fiction. One of the two protagonists of *The Night Watchman*, for example, is Patrice, a young woman who has both traditional feminine and masculine features. Patrice works in the jewelry bearing plant, and she is the fastest worker, which means her hands are much more dexterous than those of other women. However, Patrice also has traditional masculine features. She is independent and doesn’t rely on anyone but works to support her family. Instead of her mostly absent drunken father, she takes the responsibility as a man to raise her family. She does man’s work, like using an ax to expertly chop wood. She hunts with snares, similar to Old Tallow.

3. Male Characters in Erdrich’s Fiction

Significantly, Erdrich writes few male characters as strong as the above-mentioned female characters and many more negative male ones than female ones. Some male characters are foolish, greedy, and comic. Two Strike’s stepfather Albert LaPautre becomes a thief who robs almost everything from Omakayas’ family, leaving them nearly

to starve to death. In the series, Erdrich doesn't write any female character to be laughed at or hated equivalent to such unappealing male character.

The Birchbark House series does feature bad male characters who improve. For example, at first Omakayas dislikes her younger brother Pinch, for "He had an eager, greedy, pushing nature" (*Birchbark* 47). In *The Porcupine Year*, however, Pinch meets his spirit animal, which is a porcupine, and he changes to a loving brother and a good uncle for Omakayas' twin sons in the fourth and fifth books.

Negative male characters are also more present than negative female ones in *The Night Watchman*, where villainous male characters like Patrice's parasitic father, abuse alcohol, drugs, and other people.

Although Erdrich writes more positive female characters than male ones in *The Birchbark House* series and *The Night Watchman*, she does not depict all men negatively. The point is that she sees variety and complexity in human nature and Ojibwe culture. In *The Birchbark House* series, for instance, in the evening Omakayas' Deydey (father) likes to tell stories about his travels, different places, people, and animals, and best of all, ghosts.

In *The Night Watchman*, there are also good, strong men. Thomas, for example, the co-protagonist of the novel with Patrice, is based on Erdrich's beloved grandfather, who inspired her book. Thomas is a responsible and loving man who is largely responsible for saving his tribe from the proposed US government termination bill by organizing a petition against it and traveling to Washington, D.C. to give testimony against it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Erdrich portrays different kinds of men and women in her works to give a wide view of Native American cultures and human nature, especially women. Paula Gunn Allen says in *The Sacred Hoop*: "Certainly, there is reason to believe that many American Indians tribes thought that the primary potency in the universe was female, and that understanding authorizes all tribe activities, religious or social" (26). Surely, in her books for children and for adults Erdrich portrays strong female characters who have primary potency in different ways.

Works Cited

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