

## Louise Erdrich's Portrayal of Spatial Predicament of Pregnant Bodies in *Tracks*



Fasih ur Rehman	Lecturer in English, Khushal Khan Khattak University Karak, KP, Pakistan. Email: <a href="mailto:fasihurrehmanku@gmail.com">fasihurrehmanku@gmail.com</a>
Gohar Munir Mukhi	MS in English, Department of English, The National College of Business Administration and Economics, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
Qamar Sumaira	Lecturer in English, Department of English, Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Abstract:** *The present study aims to revisit Native American woman's experience of out of placeness due to her pregnancy in Louise Erdrich's Tracks. The study argues that the protagonist experiences spatial identity crisis within the socio-spatial paradigms. The present work reread the novel through the theoretical formulations of Tim Cresswell and Iris Marian Young. The notion of out of placeness is constituted upon the premise that an individual's failure to develop belongingness to a particular space and place is caused by multiple factors. Pregnancy, as Young asserts, destabilizes an individual's idea of a 'subject'. With these theoretical underpinnings, that study maintains that the protagonist of the novel experiences out of placeness and develops a fractured spatial identity in the novel.*

**Key Words:** Erdrich, Native American Body, Out of Placeness, Place, Pregnancy, Space

### Introduction

The human body is framed in a structure that does not amalgamate or mix with any other body; therefore, it always maintains its individualistic status. This individualized status and idiosyncratic characteristics of the body make it an entity, which takes up space and transforms according to space and place. This interchangeability with reference to space and place and control over some specific space make bodies "fluid and flexible" (McDowell, 1999, p. 34). It is relevant to claim that the fluidity and flexibility of bodies result differently. In other words, there is a marked difference between how men and women occupy spaces. Within this gendered spatio-corporal paradigm, pregnant bodies occur at a different spatial location. According to Young, pregnant women and new mothers like infants lack an initial sense of boundary. Young (2005) elaborates the notion of pregnancy and spatiality by asserting that in pregnancy a woman does not develop a "firm sense of" bodily boundaries (p. 164). The statement indicates that pregnancy has often a negative impact on an individual's sense of space. A pregnant woman develops a sense of "alienation" from the experience of pregnancy (McDowell, 1999, p. 59).

*Tracks* delineates the story of a people who "stumbled toward the government bait, never looking down, never noticing how the land was snatched" from under their steps, subsequently, the loss of land brought "unrest and curse of trouble" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 4). Although Fleur realizes that, "the land will go. The land will be sold and measured", nonetheless, she is desperate to hold on to her lands and to raise enough money to buy back her land, or "at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks" of her existence (Erdrich, 1988, p. 8). Therefore, when the protagonists leave their places and inhabit at any other place in this selected fiction, the sense of out of placeness overwhelms the character, which ultimately influences her actions. Cresswell identifies a sense of out of placeness as the lack of a sense of belonging to a certain place (p. 6). The protagonists develop this sense of out of placeness when they are confronted with the "otherness" (Bakhtin, 2008, p. 101) of a certain place. In the selected fiction, the authors deliberately emphasize the 'otherness' of the foreign places, hence, justifies the ambivalent attitude of the character. We see Fleur visits Argus, and stays there for few months, however,

she fails to develop any sort of emotional attachment to the place. In addition, she develops skills, which are considered unbecoming of an Anishinabe woman. She plays cards with men, and when they rape her, she brings a tornado at the Kozka's Meats. In her rage, she builds a cry "faint at first, a whistle and then a shrill scream that tore through the walls and gathered around", and then through her magical prowess makes Pauline and Russell slide the thick iron bar "along the wall and fall across the hasp and lock" the three men in the locker ([Erdrich, 1988](#), p. 28). However, these are not the only instances of experience of out of placeness, the present study revisits the novel to explore yet another dimension of the experience of out of placeness within the socio-spatial paradigm.

### Theoretical Framework

[Cresswell \(1996\)](#) maintains that something is in place when it "belong(s)" to a particular geographical location (p. 7). This belongingness is either in form of an action or material body experience of a place and is structured upon the expectations associated with a particular place. Therefore, anything or anybody that confirms the expected or normal is considered as in place. [Cresswell \(1996\)](#) further adds that the notion of in place may existentially occur before out of place, however, logically it is secondary (p. 22). Thus the overarching structure that appears maintains that an individual may initially act in place or may experience a preliminary in placeness before he/she indulges in an out of place action or experience out-of-placeness. Furthermore, the notion of out of place premise on the idea of not belongingness to a particular place ([Cresswell \(1996\)](#), p. 7). Describing the notion of out of place, Cresswell maintains that an individual's understanding of being in place is "structured within an awareness of being out of place" (p. 15). In other words, the out of place metaphor corresponds to behavior "that deviates from the established norms" ([Cresswell \(1996\)](#), p. 8). Since places demand actions that are appropriate and conform to the expectation, therefore, an activity or an attitude that is nonconformist to the normative is considered as out of place. Furthermore, the out-of-place metaphor makes the commonsense relationship between places, people, and behavior obvious. While on the other hand, labeling of actions as inappropriate "in the context of a particular place" serves as proof for the occurrence of normative geography ([Cresswell \(1996\)](#), p. 10).

In this section, I discuss how Fleur, the protagonist of Louise Erdrich *Tracks*, develops a sense of out of placeness due to her pregnancy. In her acclaimed essay, *Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation* Iris Marian Young explores the notion of *subjectivity* in the discourse of pregnancy. She studies the pregnant subject's viewpoint about the experience of pregnancy from a phenomenological standpoint. She establishes her argument in two different, yet interrelated notions. First, she describes the uniqueness of bodily existence. Second, she explores the institutional procedures, practices and pregnant subject experiences. [Young \(2005\)](#) argues, "the pregnant subject is decentered, split, or doubled" (p. 46). The statement suggests that the pregnant subject experience itself in a different way compared to its non-pregnant status. The pregnant subject confuses her body as "herself and not herself" (p. 46), which suggests that the subject has the impression of being an individual entity, but the physical changes that take place during pregnancy imprint on its mind that it is not an individualized entity rather it is accommodating another entity within its body space. Young further argues that the idea of splits further develops when the subject experience the inner movements of the fetus. However, the subject receives this experience at the cost of realization of the fact that the movements "belong to another being, yet they are not other" ([Young \(2005\)](#), p. 46). These physical experiences are further consolidated by the rearrangement of the boundaries of the body during pregnancy. Young asserts that during pregnancy subject experiences a constant shift in the boundaries and it "challenges the integration of ... body experience by rendering fluid boundary between what is within ... and what is outside, separate" ([Young \(2005\)](#), p. 49). In other words, the distinction between inner and outer self appears suspended throughout the pregnancy, labor and at the time of birth. During this process the subject feels constant reshaping of the inner, consequently, affecting its outer. However, during childbirth, the inner emerges out and takes a different form. Documenting her own experiences of being pregnant, Young asserts, "the integrity of my body is undermined in pregnancy not only by this externality of the inside but also by the fact that the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux" (p. 50). The statement suggests that a pregnant subject does not entertain the limits of the boundaries of its body because the body is constantly shaping and reshaping

during the whole process. Therefore, Young asserts that in pregnancy, the pregnant subject does not have a sense of the location of its body in the world it inhabits. This leads Young to her second argument, where she discovers that the institutional procedures and practices that a pregnant subject experience engenders a sense of alienation in the subject in multiple ways. Since the medical profession treats pregnancy as a “condition that deviates from normal health”, the pregnant subject is compelled to feel out of place in the real world. Young claims, “the control over knowledge about pregnancy and birth process that the physician has through instruments, moreover, devalues the privileged relation she has to the fetus and her pregnant body” (p. 47). This realization of another human’s knowledge superiority regarding the pregnant body is disturbing for the subject. In such cases, the subject develops alienating tendencies to the treatment and physicians.

[Young \(2005\)](#) further claims, “pregnancy roots me to the earth, makes me conscious of the physicality of my body not as an object, but as the material weight that I am in movement” (p. 52). In this statement, the use of the word “root” may not be considered a synonym for the sense of *in-placeness*. This rootedness to earth comes from the “awareness of the effort and the feeling of resistance” ([Young \(2005\)](#) p. 53) generated from the engagement in day-to-day activities. This compels the pregnant subject to “experience her pregnant body as being ugly and alien” (Young, p. 53) to the dominant culture. Furthermore, the pregnant subject experiences alienation during pregnancy because it is identified as a “disorder” (Young, p. 56). In this section, I explore how a pregnant subject engenders a sense of alienation in the spaces that it inhabits.

Pregnancy is seen as an abnormality and disorder in western culture since in dominant cultures pregnancy is allotted a specific space. Using, Mary Douglas’s notion of “matter out of place”, Longhurst in her essay *Pregnant Bodies in Public Spaces* explores the relationship between pregnancy and its spatial location. As discussed earlier, that pregnant bodies are considered alien and abnormal, they are also seen as a threat to the “social system that requires them to remain largely confined to private space during pregnancy” ([Longhurst, 1999](#), p. 33). In other words, pregnant bodies are not allowed to appear in public spaces and are confined to the private space of a home. Pregnant bodies are marginalized due to their

nonconformity to the norms of public spaces. [Longhurst, 1999](#) argues that pregnant bodies occur at the peripheries and “can be seen to occupy borderlines state as they disturb identity, system and order by not respecting border, positions and rules” (p. 33). To establish it as fact, Longhurst conducts a study on pregnant women living in Hamilton, New Zealand. The study includes documented interviews and focuses group discussions with 31 women who were pregnant for the first time (p. 33). In her study, Longhurst finds that “many of the women increasingly withdrew from public space the more visibly pregnant they became” (p. 36). The findings of the study also suggest that most of the women try to avoid “public statements” (Longhurst, p. 36) about their pregnancy, which further consolidate the idea that pregnancy is seen as more of a disability and illness. Informing people about pregnancy is often considered as inviting public gaze to one’s own body, which in itself is a step towards marginalization of the body. Longhurst, in her study, notes a steady decrease in outdoor activities of pregnant women, which suggests, “pregnant women become increasingly confined to home” (p. 37). Confinement to home, or the private space, is seen as a departure from the public sphere that is resulted from a sense of out of placeness in the public space. Pregnant women engender a sense of un-belonging to the public space because their physical limitation becomes a hindrance in establishing an emotional attachment to public spaces. Longhurst uses symbolic maps to document pregnant women’s perception of spatiality. These symbolic maps present a comparative analysis of how pregnancy affects their perception of public and private space. The maps exhibit a marked difference between the perception of spaces and places before and after pregnancy. The maps show a clear demarcation between the scope of public and private spaces during pregnancy. While discussing the reasons for withdrawal from public spaces and confinement to private spaces, Longhurst asserts that it is not the “physical discomfort” in public spaces, but the “power relations” that cause pregnant women to become confined to private spaces (p. 37). The statement suggests that pregnant women do not leave public spaces due to their physical condition or the physical problems that they encounter in public spaces, rather it is the discourse that the patriarchal society establishes around the issue of pregnancy. Indeed, pregnant women are subject to the constant gaze, both by men and non-pregnant women, which makes

pregnancy an act of transgression or deviation. Longhurst further asserts that the idea to restrict pregnant women's withdrawal to physicality would be a mere simplification of the whole argument. She agrees that the "material body" of pregnant woman is different from a non-pregnant, however, it does not mean that her decision of withdrawal "from public space is due to physical, material, corporeal demands of pregnancy" (Longhurst, p. 37). Longhurst claims, "it is not the weighty, material body in discomfort or health, not simply biological bedrock that can explain pregnant women's withdrawal from public space", rather it is the constantly "constructed" and "inscribed" dominant discourse that compels pregnant women to undergo confinement (p. 37).

### Analysis

In the following section, I discuss how this constructed and inscribed discourse affects the life of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* protagonist, Fleur Pillager. I also explore the multiple responses she receives after the news of her supposed pregnancy becomes public. Erdrich uses spaces of disability to highlight how Native American patriarchy subjugates the Native American woman. Nevertheless, before I delve into the discussion, I would like to sketch the whole episode, which begins with Fleur's rape and ends at the birth of Fleur's daughter, Lulu. It is pertinent to consider the issue of space from the angle of pregnant bodies because they are a "useful lens" (Johnston & Longhurst, 1999, p. 34) to investigate the issue of space and place.

In comparison to her dramatic departure to Argus, Fleur's arrival at the reservation is seemingly "quiet" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 31). The rape incident at Kozka's Meat compels Fleur to leave Argus and return to Matchimanito. She lives quietly with her boat on her ancestral lands, but in reality, her quiet arrival stirs a host of discussion and gossips. People on the reservation are not only curious about her quiet arrival, but her eccentric demeanor also escalated suspicion. The story of Fleur's rape reached reservation before her arrival; however, as Pauline puts it, the story "comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning. They get the middle wrong too. They only know they don't know anything" (Erdrich, p. 31). This gave people an opportunity to concoct it according to their sweet will. Nanapush is the first one to witness Fleur walking

back onto the reservation, and observes something "small, split down the back and strained across the front" hid in a green rag of a dress (Erdrich, p. 34). He too is not sure as to whether Fleur is hiding money in the dress, or her child. Nanapush does not think of "wilder things" and claims that Fleur does not appear that her feet "have slid through blood, or that she's forced a grown man to dance with a pig" (Erdrich, p. 34). Fleur does not answer Nanapush's invitation and walks on, glancing at nobody else, to her ancestral lands (Erdrich, p. 34). Fleur's arrival not only stirs the stagnant reservation life but generates fabricated stories "things hidden were free to walk. The surprised young ghost of Jean Hat limped out of the bushes around the place his horse had spooked" (Erdrich, p. 35). Some claim that her arrival has made the lake man retreat to the deepest rocks and that she has "controlled" (Erdrich, p. 35) the monster of Matchimanito. Some people claim that Fleur has set a commotion in the waters of the lake and "disturbed" the area around Matchimanito (Erdrich, p. 35). People have become afraid of going into these woods because of their loneliness and they do not want to confront Fleur. On the reservation, people speculated about her marriage with the waterman, Misshepesu. Some claimed that "she lives in shame with white men or windigos, or that she's killed them all" (Erdrich, p. 31). People on reservation speculate about the money Fleur brings with her claiming that Fleur has married some white man in Argus but the man has given her "money to leave and never come around again" (Erdrich, p. 39) still, other claims that Fleur has "stolen it from the man" (Erdrich, p. 39). People come to know about her money and her plans to stay at her lands when she pays "the annual fee on every Pillager allotment she inherited" and lay in a "store of supplies that would last through winter" (Erdrich, p. 36). Although Nanapush claims, "it was the money itself, the coins and bills, that made more talk" but the news of Fleur's pregnancy also awakes the reservation. People speculate about her child also, since the father of the child is unknown. Pauline claims that the child's green eyes and skin color made more talks, since "no one can decide if the child is mixed blood or what, fathered in a smokehouse, or by a man with brass scales, or by the lake" (Erdrich, p. 31). Margaret thinks that the child would "turn out cleft, fork-footed like a pig, with straw for hair. Its eyes would glow blue, its skin shines dead white" (Erdrich, p. 55). However, when the child is born, it is a "bold", and

“smiling” girl who “knows what people wonder, as if she hears the old men talk, turning the story over” (Erdrich, p. 31).

The spatial discourse constructed around Fleur's pregnant body in *Tracks* exhibits Erdrich's sensitivity about the women and her spatial location in the Native American society. In the preceding sections, I explored the reaction of people to Fleur's pregnancy. In the following section, I discuss how Fleur engenders a sense of out of placeness on the reservation and why she departs from the public space and becomes confined to her private space of Machimanito cabin. Erdrich, by delineating these claims, tries to establish that the people on reservation consider Fleur a threat to their social setup. For them, Fleur has become a misfit in that place, since she threatens to disrupt the hierarchical structure of Native American society. The cultural setup of Native American society does not allow Fleur to occupy space in the public space. For the Native American patriarchy, Fleur's occupation of a place in public space has become an unacceptable situation, because, according to it Fleur has transgressed the social norms. In *Tracks*, Erdrich uses confinement to the private sphere as a potent image to destabilize the power relations structured on spatial differences. Fleur's confinement to her family cabin shows that her material body has become “different” and out of place (Longhurst, 1999, p. 40). It is this sense of out of placeness in the public sphere that compels Fleur to confine herself to her ancestral cabin.

To understand Fleur's social confinement, it is pertinent to explore Fleur's attitude towards public and private spaces with reference to the rape incident and subsequent pregnancy. Before Fleur's rape, she actively participates in the public sphere. She takes a job at Kozka's Meat and indulges in work that requires extreme physical strength. However, after the unfortunate incident at Argus, she returns to the reservation and lives a secluded life. She even does not visit the Agent to pay the annual allotment fee, rather sends her cousin Moses to pay it and buy supplies that “would last through winters” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 36). Longhurst and Johnston (1999) claim that the pregnant body is “a space” and “exist within various material and discursive spaces” (p. 34). In *Tracks*, however, Fleur avoids material public space and confines to the private space. Although she develops a passive relation to the public space, however, her relation to the private space is deep and sensitive. She feels a sense of belonging and establishes an emotional

relationship with her lands, which she does not want to break for she is aware that the loss of land would mean loss of self. This emotional attachment compels her to enter the public space and earn enough money to buy her lands back. However, her struggle is cut short by her rape and subsequent pregnancy, which bars her from indulging in any work in the public space. In this situation, the only option available to Fleur is to marry and legitimize the birth of the child. Therefore, she uses her medicinal powers and magic to attract Eli towards herself, this attraction ends at their marriage. Longhurst, 1999 claims that a pregnant subject is not “looked upon as sexually active or desirable”, which further marginalizes the subject to experience its body as “ugly and alien” (p. 53). She experiences a sense of loss of identity because she transforms into an individual who has embodied a new self. Since this embodiment occurs at a place to which Fleur does not feel any sense of belonging, so the new self is also alien to her. Longhurst argues that a pregnant subject's experience of pregnancy “is often alienated because her condition tends to be defined as a disorder” (p. 56). Whereas this might be true about subjects who have a legitimate relationship, but in case of Fleur, she experiences this alienation because she is defined as immoral. Fleur, even after her pregnancy, charms Eli into sexual infatuation. The reasons are obvious; firstly, she becomes aware and acutely sensitive towards her own sexuality. Secondly, through her sexual indulgence, she actually tries to regain someplace in the social fabric. Longhurst claims that a pregnant subject develops a narcissist relationship towards her body (p. 53), but we do not see such narcissist tendencies in Fleur. Her obsession with the lands does not allow her to develop any sort of liking for her own pregnant body; it is for this reason that Erdrich does not describe Fleur's relationship with her body. Furthermore, Fleur's confining to private space is an effort to avoid the public gaze directed upon her body. Fleur experiences a disturbing gaze, which is loaded with a message of disapproval from the people on the reservation. Therefore, when she confesses to Nanapush that she made a mistake in leaving her own place, she believes that she “shouldn't have left this place” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 38).

Fleur remains confined to the private space of her cabin even after her marriage to Eli, and after marrying Eli Keshpaw, she refuses to go and live on the Keshpaw's lands (Erdrich, p. 57). Fleur's confinement to her family cabin last long after the birth of her

daughter. Fleur ends her confinement long after the birth of her daughter, and that too is because she intends to avenge Nanapush's and Margaret's humiliation by Lazarre and Clarence (Erdrich, p. 118). The instances presented above shows that Louise Erdrich in *Tracks* presents that the pregnant body is marginalized and not allowed to occupy a place in public space. The whole episode of Fleur's pregnancy is constructed around the discourse of spatiality. Erdrich deals with the issue with utmost mastery and presents how women are deprived of their rightful place in the public sphere. Based on Fleur's disability, the episode demonstrates how crucial it is for individuals to claim their rightful place.

## Conclusion

In her seminal essay, *Figuring the Grotesque in Louise Erdrich's Novel* critic Mary Catherine [Harper \(2012\)](#) identifies "tangled relationships and obsessive characters", and claims that Erdrich's characterization leads to establish her novels on the model of "Midwestern grotesque novel genre" (p. 18). However, this element of grotesque is not limited to Erdrich's portrayal of the idiosyncratic nature of the character, rather this dwells deep in their relationship with the space and place also. Through spatial and subjective interconnectedness, Erdrich brings forth the dilemma of an individual's spatiality. In short, an individual is not merely a physical subject, but a spatial subject too.

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