

### Casualties of Traumatic Events in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*

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#### Abstract:

Children are a gift from God and everyone is happy when they enter into the world. The family situation and nature play an important role in the life of the children. Their inner psyche is framed on them by the societal norms of their surroundings. They need better surrounding to lead a peaceful life. Unfortunately, they fall prey to societal issues which ultimately lead to trauma. Trauma is commonly known as the “shell-shock” events that affected the psyche of human beings. Especially, children are easily affected by traumas and they do not know the way to come out of it. They can easily get affected and admitted to their situation and suffer a lot to overcome their problems. But the children of an indigenous community are exceptions to this kind of situation, some of them they have been psychologically affected and they overcome their problems with the help of their environment.

**Key Words:** shell-shock, Trauma, indigenous, environment

The present paper analyses how children suffer when they undergo trauma in life, with reference to Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*. Erdrich presents how children undergo trauma when their life makes a trauma in their life. The novel presents the psychological trauma of a young girl from an indigenous community called the Ojibwa. The Ojibwa people are also known as the Anishnabeg and they belong to the northern part of America. The Ojibwa people are different from other indigenous people for they give respect to nature and nature is a part of their family and have seven sacred teachings specially made for their tribes. They know the power of nature and strongly

believe that nature has the capacity to create and destroy. The Anishnabeg consider nature as their own family member. Though nature harms them, they never curse it but they learn to get adjusted to any situation.

According to Helen Keller, “Although life is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming of it”. (Helen Keller) Trauma plays an important role in the life of a human being. Everyone has to face it and overcome it, but in some cases, it creates vast damage in life. Omakayas is a little girl from the community of Ojibwa, who is very bold and at the same time very much affectionate towards her family. Her family has seven members and each member of the family represents the seven sacred teachings of their community. The Anishnabeg people believe in nature and Omakayas also follow the teachings of their ancestors. As a little girl, she enjoys each and every act of nature like the morning dew, the blaring sun, the sound of the birds, paw prints of bears, the running sound of the river and so on. Like her grandmother, Nokomis Omakayas also considers the trees and animals as brothers and sisters.

The Ojibwa people mostly use the bark of the birch tree to build their houses and the logs of the willow tree. Omakayas accompanies her grandmother to take the birch bark. Before cutting the tree they pray to the tree for forgiveness. Before cutting the bark Omakayas says, ““Old sister” , “we need your skin”” (7). She considered the old tree as her old sister. She believes that the trees also have feelings and pains like human beings. The little girl spends her whole day with nature. Not only the trees but also understands the feelings of the animals too. The little girl feels more comfortable getting accommodated with the bears than humans, for the bears were considered to be precious by the Anishnabegs.

Nature is a part and parcel of every life and it is a tremendous gift from God. People need to accept the negative side of nature too. Likewise, the Ojibwa people also had to face the dreadful disease called ‘smallpox’. One-third of the world is colonized by the colonizers and the natives were slowly washed out of their land. India is also not an exception to it. The same incident happens to the labourers working as slaves in the tea estates under the British people. The poor labourers were affected by a dreadful disease and many people lost their lives because of the carelessness of the white officials. It is not clear in the history but the incidents were narrated by the Indian ancestors. For that, a visitor from another place has spread the disease on the Island.

Omakayas's village is also affected by the disease and Omakayas is an exception, but all the other member of the family slowly gets infected by the disease.

Children are the happiest beings in the world. They don't know what the word stress means. Omakayas enjoys her life with nature. Unfortunately, the family's responsibility falls on the small girl Omakayas. Even as a child, she has to nurse her whole family and it is a difficult task for her. Omakayas and Deydey nurture the family and later her father also falls sick to the core the sickness affected his mind and went out to freeze himself. Omakayas struggles a lot to bring him near the fire because the affected ones should be kept near the fire.

“Gaween onjidah”, she said, “ I'm sorry”

Raising a block of wood high, she brought it down on his head with all of her strength. He crumpled to the ground. Omakayas sobbed as she dragged his blankets to him and covered him. He was too heavy to drag near the fire. For a long time she kneeled next to him, praying for him to live. She loved him, her Deydey. What would they do without him? Back in her own blankets, she immediately sank into a fierce oblivion. (153)

The protagonist Omakayas is physically and mentally tired of her situation. She is affected psychologically then physically. According to Freud, ‘Psychoanalysis makes a basic assumption, the discussion of which remains the preserve of psychological thought, and the justification for which lies in its results’ (Freud, no.175). This paper analyses the psychological trauma of the little girl, because of the death of her little brother and her friend.

Death is an inevitable thing in this world, but it can bring dangerous calamity to one's life. Neewo is the lovable sibling of Omakayas and she loves to spend time with that baby boy and cares for him like a mother and that is why she cannot accept the death of her baby brother. All the family members get well from the disease and slowly start to forget the death, but the little girl could not forget the death of her baby brother and friend. This incident harms her and she becomes sick, not with the smallpox, but with an illness of weakness and grief at heart. Though the family members recover, there is a guilt in her mind that she couldn't save the life of her baby brother. This haunts her mind and it has made her ill inwardly.

The memories of her baby brother haunt her day by day. The girl sits like a stone and thinks about him. While seeing the small dresses of her baby brother she thinks that he will never come back to wear them. Omakayas, “She ate less and less, thought long into the night. Often, in her mind’s eye, she saw Neewo’s tiny makazins, forlorn in the firelight, as they sagged, tipped over when in his fever he kicked them off”(156). As a little girl, this is too difficult to accept and she becomes too weak because of the grief. The girl did not eat much and thought that she should have taken him into the woods and come back after smallpox had gone. Food does not interest her. She always thinks that “what she could have done to arrest the illness. Fed him more soup? Forced him to keep his makazins warm on his feet? Taken him until the smallpox had run its course? . . .” (156-57). By seeing her situation her grandma and mama become worried and they try their level best to bring her back to normal life.

Our life is like the seasons of nature. After winter, there is definitely a spring season, likewise after the terrible incident, the family become normal in the spring. The winter was too hard and slowly spring started to enter the village. Omakayas also slowly comes out from her grief like the thawing of the frozen lake, with the help of her family and nature. But it is also not a permanent one and in the meantime, she comes to know that she is not a member of her family. It is a great twist in her life.

At the beginning of the novel, the author mentioned a baby girl from an island called spirit island. She is taken from that Island by a hunter woman named Old Tallow and she is narrating all these things to Omakayas. The name Omakayas in the Ojibwa language means ‘Little frog’ or otherwise known as ‘Want to live’. The little baby is the only soul who survived on Spirit Island against a dreadful itching disease and also from smallpox. Old Tallow says that the girl is born to survive and to serve others. Though she comforts her she could not accept the truth. This truth also haunts her mind and she became restless. From that day onwards there is a heavy burden in her heart.

The protagonist wants to know the healing medicines and wants to become like her grandmother. Once her wish becomes true and her treatment heals the wound of her brother’s pinch. Though she cures wounds outwardly and she does not know the medicine to heal herself inwardly. Later she recognizes that the medicine for her suffering is nature. She runs into the woods

and lies on the wed bed of grass. The music of the leafless trees and the birds seems to be the healer of her wounded heart. While laying on the ground,

. . . She heard Neewo.

She heard her little brother as though he still existed

in the world. She heard him tell her to cheer up and live.

I'm all right, his voice was saying, I'm in a peaceful place. You

can depend on me. I'm always hear to help you, my sister.

Omakayas tucked her hands behind her head, lay back,

closed her eyes, and smiled as long as of the white-

throated sparrow sank again and again through the air

like a shining needle, and sewed up her broken heart. (239)

In that loneliness, she can hear the sound of her little brother Neewo that he is in a peaceful place and the sound of the white-throated bird is sewing her heart.

It can be understood that for all the psychic traumas, with the help of nature. Nature guides a person to get rid of his psychological traumas and it leads him into a peaceful path like the protagonist of Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*. Thus nature has a cure and we learn to receive the cure.

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