

CONFLICT BETWEEN EURO-AMERICAN AND NATIVE AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS NATURE: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *TRACKS* AND *LOVE MEDICINE* BY LOUISE ERDRICH

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Abstract

Euro-American and Native American approaches to Nature are conflicting: the former consists in competition with Nature whereas the latter is characterized by harmony with it. Unlike the Whites, the Natives realize their dreams of culture and society in Nature, not against it. Contrarily, the whites realize themselves in controlling Nature which is only euphemism for destroying it. Nature in the Euro-American literature finds its place only as a background, rather than the central feature as the canonical American works bear witness. Even Wordsworth, the representative white poet of Nature, only utilizes Nature for his pantheistic ideas; Nature in itself does not carry significant position in his works. In Hemingway, Nature is predominant but only as a facilitator for the realization of sublime self of the code hero. So it is in Eugene O'Neill and Emerson and Whitman. But, for Native Americans Nature is an animate being, as living as they themselves are and sometimes it becomes even more significant when it gets religious sanctity. Bear, eagle and its feathers, the sun, and even water are a source of life to be depended and worshipped and requested to in all moments of crises and celebration. This article explores the shift of attitude towards Nature which actually reflects shift in man's position in the universe.

Keywords: Nature, Euro-Americanism, Native Americanism, Eco-criticism, competition, harmony, epistemological difference

Introduction

Louise Erdrich, like Joy Harjo, syncretically blends European and Native American cultures and religions: she incorporates Christian tradition in *Baptism of Desire* and suggests the essential changeability and multiplicity of physical and spiritual reality. There is a

suggestion of *inter-special transformation* through celibacy and other forms of asceticism in the catholic tradition ... [S]*piritual power is realized in the profound connections among the cohabitants of the material world.* Transcendence is, then, experienced *along a horizontal trajectory*, as much as vertical one, and God is imminent in our *mutual* desire and need. (Hughes 43)

Native Americanism is marked with unending continuum among all co-habitants of life leading to metamorphoses. Joy Hrjo rejects the “hierarchical vision of creation promoted by Christianity” (Hughes 43) and offers the Native perspective: the shape is a spiral in which all beings resonate. The bear is one version of human and vice versa. The human is not above the bear, nor Adam naming the bear” (Hughes 43). She concludes cogently: “Transformation is really about *understanding the shape and condition of another with compassion, not about overtaking*” (qtd. in Ruwe 60; emphasis added). For Native Americans all matter is sacred and dynamic and full of life. God is lives at the roots of molecular structure of all life.

Ecocritical Approaches

Peter Barry places the existing USA ecocritical tradition in the writings of Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau, all three members of the group of New England writers, collectively known as transcendentalists. Emerson says in *Nature*: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky ... *I have enjoyed perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear*” (qtd. in Barry, p. 250, emphasis added). Fuller says in *Summer on the Lakes, During 1843*: “... Awake or asleep, there is no escape, still this (nature) *rushing round you and through you.* It is in this way *I have most felt* the grandeur – somewhat eternal, if not infinite (qtd. in Barry, p. 250, emphasis added). Thoreau’s *Walden* is a classic work on the theme of return to nature. American ecocriticism is, hence, rooted in transcendentalism of 1830s and 40s. British ecocriticism, or Green Studies, on the other hand, is rooted in Romanticism of 1790s. Jonathan Bate with his *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* is the pioneering figure in the British ecocriticism, thinks that “Romanticism gives up on its original impulses and finds what it supposes is ‘[a] paradise within, happier far’” (Bate, 1991, p. 3). Differentiating the two traditions, Barry (p. 251) observes that US version is celebratory, disparagingly referred to as ‘tree hugging’; and the British version is ‘minatory’: warning against environmental threats

because of the forces of industrialization and commercialization. Ecocriticism does not second one of the central claims of modern literary theory that the truth is discursively constructed; Nature really exists out there and we affect it and are affected by it. Kate Soper has observed: “It is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer” (p. 151). The basics of ecocriticism include representation of natural world, incorporation of such concepts as “growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources” (Barry, p. 264), and focus on external world with our collective responsibility rather than its being constructed by and in language.

Native American Attitude towards Nature

Native Americans believe in harmony with Nature, not in competition with or control over it. They regard it as much living as they themselves are. The plants, therefore, for instance, are believed to have a leader amongst them just as human groups have leaders. The belief reflects their tribal mode of existence in which individual is secondary to the collective identity of the tribe. Euro-Americanism consists in cut-throat competition and its consequences even Nature has to face. American dream has its roots in this spirit of competition. Native Americans, on the contrary, believe in co-existence, not competition. The result is that Nature never suffers at their hands. They do not share the exploitative belief in *humanism* which gives man the central place in the universe at the cost of all other things and grants him a license to kill and destroy as and when he likes. Native Americans believe that human survival and strength depend upon harmony with nature, not upon manipulation of it.

Transcendentalist View of Nature

American transcendentalism is rooted in Unitarianism, German romanticism, post-Kantian idealism of Carlyle and Cousin. The essential belief is that God pervades in all the aspects Nature, but his all-pervasiveness is too narrow to include anything besides human beings, not to speak of the sweet four-leggeds of the Natives. Brownson proceeded to identify the spirituality of the Transcendentalists with liberty and democracy: “... truth lights her torch in the inner temple of *every man's soul*, whether patrician or plebeian, a shepherd or a philosopher, a Croesus or a beggar. It is universal, *in all men*, and in *every man*, that you can found a democracy (Finseth 1995): transcendentalism addresses only human beings and human nature is the goal, the end. Nature with its *lower* manifestations is not part of this scheme. The placement of Nature at the lower rung in Emerson’s cosmology expresses the dominating impulse:

	The One God Nous Soul, World-Soul		
Light		Soul	Reason
Darkness	Nature (The Hierarchy of Ethical Ascent cited in Carey 1975)	Body	Understanding

Native American Relationship with Nature

Native Americanism is characterized by harmony with Nature. Even in description of deaths Erdrich does not miss the tribal contact with earth: "... that disease must have claimed all the Anishnabe that the earth could hold, and bury" (p. 1, my italics). The chain relationship of all manifestations of life from animate to inanimate, from plant kingdom to animal kingdom to human beings. Even the dead ones are not excluded from this chain of relationship. Nanapush says to his granddaughter, "... you are the child of the invisible" (p. 1) and Pukwan feared entering the dense forest lest "the unburied pillager spirits might seize him by the throat and turn him windigo" (p. 3). In this chain relationship space and time are in all-inclusive unity: past is not a lost diminished entity; it is also present: the water of Matchimanito lake is "surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers" (p. 2).

Competition vs Harmony with Nature

Erdrich shows a sustained lamentation over white competition with Nature. Nanapush is grieved at the end of apocalyptic ecological luxury:

I guided the *last buffalo hunt*. I saw the *last bear shot*. I trapped the *last beaver* with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I *axed the last birch that was older than I* and I saved the last Pillager. (p. 2, emphasis added)

The Indians might be dying in severity of weather Nature is never against indifferent to humans. When Nanapush clan is burdened with snow, he says: "We became so heavy weighed down with the lead gray frost that we could not move. The blood within us grew thick. We needed no food" (6) and despite all that when Nanapush finds the bare ground, he "was so surprised that (he) bent down and touched the soft, wet earth" (7). Rather in misery man and nature are in intenser mutuality. Nanapush says: "I weakened into an old man as on oak went down" (9). The height of mutuality is that Indians bury their dead ones in trees to let the birds of prey live on their dead flesh although the priest discourages this mode of burying.

Fleur Pillager scornfully calls Nanapush an old man, two wrinkled berries and a twig:

“A twig can grow,” I offered.

“But only *in the spring*” (p. 48).

These metaphors actualize in Fleur who “was pregnant, *going to have a child in spring*” (p. 42). When Nanapush says to Margaret that the cold lake water could be deceptive with its snares for the careless young people, she says: “If he (the lake man) wants me, I’ll give him as I get” (p. 50). Erdrich suggests an all pervasive mutuality in the relationship between man and nature. Rather, it is under-statement to name it mutuality; the Natives are themselves Nature. Pauline’s description of the interaction between Eli and Fleur is significant:

Some days I saw the signs, the small dents of her teeth on his arm, the scorched moons of bruises on his throat. Or I sensed touching, an odor, a warmth like sun streaming down on skin for an afternoon. In the morning, before they washed in Matchimanito, they *smelled like animals, wild and heady*, and sometimes in the dusk, *their fingers left tracks like snails, glistening and wet*. (p. 72, my italics)

They live like animals, in the true spirit of Nature, not in any derogatory sense, rather in the celebrative sense of spontaneity. Likewise the battle between Margaret and Boy Lazarre is very *natural*: “Margaret uttered a war cry that had not been heard for fifty years, and bit boy Lazarre’s hand viciously, giving a wound which would later prove death of him” (p. 112): they are nature, living nature, Nature itself. These characters do not analyze nature; they are nature embodied. This sense was negatively taken up by the Euroamerican discourse to label them as ‘primitive, uncivilized cannibals’. Columbus and his successors, in fact, did not enter cultural emptiness but into a world where culture was multi-dimensionally complex and where some places were as thickly populated as Europe itself, where relationships were humane and generous. They had no written language but their history and poetry were well preserved in memory and transferred orally from generation to generation, and was accompanied with ceremonial drama, dance and song. Gary B. Nash writes about the Iroquois tribal society inhabiting the north eastern jungles before the arrival of the Europeans: “The Iroquois maintained a strict sense of right and wrong ... He who stole another’s food or acted invalorously in war was shamed by his people and ostracized from their company until he atoned for his actions” (Zinn 19).

Mutuality with nature is a way of survival in the face of odds the Native Americans have been passing through. Moses survives by turning himself into half an animal in a den: he blackened his face, fasted for visions and got “protection from the water man, the lion in the lake” (p. 36). So much so that when he went to the island away from Matchimanito, the cats

accompanied him and now he wears “a necklace of their claws around his neck” (p. 36). People are happy at Fleur’s return because “she kept the lake thing controlled” (p. 35), suggesting an intimacy between human and natural forces.

The Other Voice

Tracks is a novel of double narrative: Nanapush’s point of view is running side by side with Pauline’s. Pauline, white man’s representative, is in disharmony between man and nature: “I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half white ... I saw that to *hang back was to perish*. I would *not speak our language*. In English I told my father we should build our outhouse *with a door that swung open and shut*” (p. 14, my italics). Her desire for a door that swings ‘open and shut’ connotes a desire inclusion and exclusion, contrary to the homes of the Native without doors suggesting tribal openness and sharing as a key feature of their culture. She looks at this mutuality suspiciously and feels sadistic pleasure in uttering the hearsay that Fleur “married with the waterman, Misshepesu, or that she lives in shame with white men or windigoes, or that she’s killed them all” (p. 31).

Spontaneous Bodily Relations

Native American characters may seem unashamedly immersed in sexuality without any sublime connotation as in American or British writers like Hemingway, Faulkner and even Shakespeare. Sexuality is part of natural spontaneity of the Native American life. In *The Antelope Wife* (1998) Erdrich weaves sexuality with botanical and atmospheric life in an inviolable harmony:

As he entered me, his face was distant in a concentration and I wrapped my legs around him ... It began to rain then, spattering at first lightly through the leaves ... (then) the increasing momentum of the drops, now *hissing* through the plants around us, wetting us very slowly, the clouds open, drawing out the scents of plants, faint winter green, balsam, a sweetly rotting mushroom funk, the spongy cakes of moss, a wildly fruited berry, crushed some deeper, browner, older scent of leaf, and then *our own bodies, also of the woods*. (p. 40, emphasis added).

Erdrich has woven human mating with rain wetting them ‘with care and softness’. The drops are hissing through the leaves, leaves and flowers giving out their fragrance and then the bodies of the lovers, part of the woods, suggest the whole nature partaking the intercourse. In *The Last Report*, Erdrich (2001) suggests the same relationship between human beings, the earth and atmosphere: “It was a dry spring day and the crust of the earth was waking and softening”. Likewise when Mary Kashpaw is

digging earth, Father Damien is watching her. He fears that the girl would hit cold but “dirt was warmed as far down as she cared to dig” and he was thinking whether she was digging those two hundred Anishnaabe graves ... interconnected” and she seemed to be “determined to dig until she dropped to her death” (p. 115). Mary Kashpaw eats pure natural things for her survival when food is scarce: she eats “wild tonic of fresh dandelion spears ... a stew of gopher and acorns, stolen eggs from the nests of finches and doves, wild currants, cattail root, (or) she snared a rabbit or mesmerized a grouse in the graveyard” (p. 118).

Pauline and Fleur Pillager: Critique of Euro-American Sensibility in *Tracks*

Pauline reflects Euro-American consciousness although she is a Native American character. Erdrich associates her with Euro-Americanism through her interests in western pursuits and her jealousy of and hatred for Fleur Pillager who is a perfect specimen of Native Americanism: she can walk inexhaustibly. Even Eli could not come up to her although he was brought up in the Native environment. Nector, Eli’s brother, was taken to the government school where he lost his Indian character, unable to be absorbed in Indian sensibility. Eli, safe from westernized education, was in harmony with forest.

Pauline has frightening tendency towards Euro-Americanism: she wants to acquire American language, mode of living, and even her identity. Sticking to the old Indian ways is death, she considers:

We were mixed bloods... In the spring before the winter that took so many Chippewa, I bothered my father into *sending me south*, to the white town. I had decided to learn the *lace-making trade from the nuns*. “*You’ll fade out there,*” he said, reminding me that I was lighter than my sisters. “*You won’t be an Indian once you return.*” “*Then maybe I won’t come back,*” I told him. I wanted to be *like my mother, who showed her half-white*. I wanted to be *like my grandfather, pure Canadian ...* Even as a child I saw that *to hang back was to perish*. I would *not speak our language*. *In English*, I told my father *we should build an outhouse with a door that swung open and shut*. (p. 14, my italics)

It is very un-Indian of Pauline to identify herself with her mother’s Englishness and her father’s pure Canadian identity; after all she was not Indian. Then if she succeeds to realize her decision of learning lace-making from the nuns, she would be completely lost to her people. Her father knows it and therefore asks her that in consequence she would fade out among those *others* but she has no regret over these prospects. Rather, she tells her father in English that they should have the doors of their homes as the white

Americans have. The traditional Indian houses did not have the divisions of doors. There were corridors separating various parts of the house. Erdrich says about June Kashpaw in *Love Medicine* that “the doorknob rolled out of her open purse and beneath the stall. She had to take that doorknob with her every time she left the room. There was no other way of locking the battered door” (Erdrich 4). Hence it is not out of place to interpret her as Euro-American sensibility and as such her reaction to Fleur Pillager, the pure Indian soul.

Fleur Pillager: An Embodiment of Indianism

Fleur is the representative of the Indianism in body and spirit. Erdrich develops her character in harmony with the environment of the forest, lake and seasons. She becomes a yardstick to measure the responses of various characters to the Native American life and culture. Advising Eli on how to hunt a moose, Nanapush says that “a strong heart moves slowly” (p. 102). If the moose gets startled, adrenaline flows into its blood and its meat toughens with “the vinegar taste of fear in it” (p. 102). Fleur is shown going out slowly to take a bath at night when it was too cold for a bath. She moved out of her home to the lake “*Stealthily, smooth* as an otter sliding from a log, she *crept off* the bed and then, seconds later, was out of the door. He heard the *latch fall softly* back into place, and then he followed her waking no one” (p. 106, my italics). The slow, smooth and soft movements, according to the criterion given by Nanapush, signify her strong heart. So strong that Eli followed her and saw her “step from her rough sleeping shift and walk, stripped and limber, hair hanging deep black, through a swath of light into the waters of Matchimanito. The calm ripples closed above her head, and there was nothing to see but the moon glinting off each small disturbance” (p. 106).

Her beliefs also reflect her Indianness: “... she kept the finger of a child in her pocket and a powder of unborn rabbits in a leather thong around her neck. She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so that she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body” (p. 12). Erdrich suggests in Fleur’s character a pure Indian soul. Some people among Indians believe that the reason of the ruin of the tribe was “the doing of the dissatisfied spirits” (p. 4) and a few pages down the narrative Nanapush says that “[a]ll she had was raw power, and the names of the dead filled her” (p. 7): she is associated with the spirits of the elders. When Nanapush wants to save Eli from her, i.e. he too suggests that it is she, the spirit of the bygone elders, of the dead, who destroy Eli, 19 year old, the young present generation. Her more than normal ways of walking and bathing also support this seemingly superstitious observation. *Tracks* offers many references to Fleur’s association with animals, plants, birds, water and phenomena of forest to show her immersion in the environment of the Indian people:

- i- She moved stealthily, smooth *as an otter* sliding from a log, she *crept* off the bed (p. 106).
- ii- “By night we heard her chuffing cough, the *bear* cough” (p. 12).
- iii- “Numb, stupid as bears in a den, we (Nanapush and Fleur) blinked at the priest’s slight silhouette” (p. 7).
- iv- “Her hand could *snake out* quickly. She *hissed*. The words flew like razor *grass* between her teeth” (p. 48).

Fleur is associated with seasons in the true spirit of Indian character. Nanapush says: “A twig can grow”. And Fleur’s response is: “But only in spring” (p. 48). Later Nanapush tells us that she was pregnant and was “going to have a child in spring” (p. 52). So she herself is the twig that will grow in the spring or she herself is the spring, the month of August that will bear fruit. Gambling is another feature of Amerindian life and Fleur is a gambler throughout Tracks. “August, the month that bears fruit ... A month running, Fleur had won thirty dollars” (p. 22).

Eli vs Paulina: Two Contrastive Responses to Fleur

Through Eli and Paulina, Erdrich has demonstrated two conflicting responses to the character of Fleur who is the embodiment of Indianism. Paulina is the Euro-Americanism in spirit although in body she is an Indian. That is valid interpretation of her character in view of tendencies towards the ‘white side of her mother’, ‘her pure Canadian father’, and her ‘decision to learn lace-making from nuns’ and the most important, her desire not to come back to the tribe again once she goes to the South. On the other hand, Eli’s attitude towards Fleur is based upon love and fascination. She is an ideal he wants to be or acquire; she is his life.

Eli is 19, in love with Fleur. Nanapush asks him to stay away from her because he is no match for her; he cannot come up to her. But his fascination for her is too strong to resist. Rather, she is his “need” and he had to struggle with his need and feels “exhausted from enduring Fleur’s indifference” (p. 106). When Fleur is bathing in the water in the lake in Matchimanito at a too cold night, “[h]e held his breath, waiting for Fleur to surface, and then threw himself forward, dived toward the place she had disappeared” (p. 106). He was ‘so shocked’ that ‘his lungs squeezed shut’ (p. 106). His response could be of shock but not of indifference, not to speak of hatred. Eli, with absolute trust in Fleur, is sure that she can manage winter as well as spring. When Nanapush tells Eli that “they’ll eat much worse than gopher out there without a man to hunt” (p. 100), Eli dismissed the fears:

“Come winter, Fleur will chop a hole in the ice and fish the lake.”

“Until then she is a good shot” (p. 100).

Eli feels himself as secure as a baby with his mother before and during winter. When the question is that there is no man to hunt, the answer

is that Fleur is there. When Albertine first comes to know about her aunt's death, she comes out of her apartment to focus her thoughts on June on a patch of green grass where spring's first dandelions – strong, abundant and “indestructible” in Lipsha's words – have already started blooming, with resilient will to survive. Relationship with Nature is actual as well as connotative, suggestive and symbolic.

Even supernaturalism of the Native Americans is rooted in Nature. Lipsha, the “little cabbage” possesses the healing touch of a shaman inherited from his great grandmother, Fleur Pillager, the medicine woman in the Pillager line. Marie approaches Lipsha for a love medicine for Nector because of his (Lipsha's) healing touch. Lipsha loses this healing touch after the death of Nector, but then, “when he takes up Nector's lowly task of prying dandelions from the earth, his power is restored” (Stookey 1999, p. 45). It is from the earth, the plant kingdom, the animals, all the manifestations of Nature, that the Native Americans derive their spiritual prowess from elements, not to ‘command the elements’, for healing a fellow being, not to be a ‘god on earth’ – as desired by Faustus – to be in horizontal relationship with the lowly, not to be in vertical relationship of superiority to the hierarchy of existence.

Conclusion

One major difference between the Euro-American and Native American literatures is that the former is rooted in history and the latter, in land. Land refers to connotation vaster than soil: it includes fauna and flora as well, and not in western sense of something to be analyzed, dissected and manipulated and *used*. The Native attitude towards nature is at horizontal level defined by harmony rather than competition. The Native American writers are writing on Nature not merely for their love for Nature; they are reconstructing the epistemology that has been erased, obliterated and blurred by the White westernized sign system. Recovery and assertion of the Native conception of Nature is a rebuttal against the white discourse of deformation of the Native culture and epistemology.

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