

WOMEN, NATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURAL 'SURVIVANCE': A READING OF TRACKS AND *THE BINGO PALACE*

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to present the roles women play in the continuation of tribal tradition in the works of Native American author Louise Erdrich. Women's role in the native communities is manifold which in a way ensures cultural 'survance'. Native women's close proximity with nature also results in showcasing their spirituality that runs in their ways of life and their deeper understanding of the surroundings and the Earth. This paper would delve deeply into the aspects of women as a preserver of native tradition and the transmitters of native wisdom in the indigenous communities.

Key Words: Native spirituality, 'survance', nature, native wisdom, preserver.

Native American tribes vary from one another in their customs, traditions, and values, but the status of Native American women can be considered as same across tribes. Native women play the role of mother, preservers of cultural knowledge, and medicine women. Their identity is based on their family, tribe, communal harmony, traditional knowledge, and spiritual understanding of the world. The continuation of tribal tradition is based on the role women play to transmit cultural wisdom in indigenous societies. The aim of this paper is to examine Native women and their relation to nature while also taking into account the traditional wisdom of native women through the theory of spiritual ecofeminism.

It should be noted that the roles of both sexes were divided according to the colonizers. Barbara Mann has pointed out that "woman-power was weakened historically through the heavy impositions of European culture" (mann xvii) but the Native women stand firmly on their lands. They keep on fighting for their rights, for their tribe. They are seen raising their voice for cultural 'survance' (Vizenor 4). Paula Gunn Allen has rightly pointed out that:

We survive war and conquest; we survive colonization, acculturations, assimilation; we survive

beating, rape, starvations, mutilation, sterilization, abandonment, neglect, death of our children, our loved ones, destruction of our land, our homes, our past, and our future. We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what. (Allen 58)

Her words hint at the diverse roles native women play in safeguarding their land and culture from the harmful forces.

Native women are not just homemakers; they also take part in economic and political affairs by taking an active part in tribal councils. Women's role in the indigenous society is significant. They are not just associated with cultivation, they are healers too. They are well aware of the medicinal properties of plants and herbs. In Native American societies, gender roles are prominent. Native men are mostly associated with hunting and safeguarding their homelands. They prove themselves as capable by taking an active part in the war, hunting animals, and saving their lands from foreigners. Native women see themselves as the custodian of the community and they think it is their responsibility to govern their plants, animals, and environment. In Native American communities, women

complement the male members by balancing their work. According to Patrice E.M. Hollrah, "The political ramifications of gender complementarity for women in Native American literature result in strong female characters in the works of Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), and Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene). These authors create powerful females who live autonomous lives" (Hollrah 1). Regarding the idea of gender complementarity, Hollrah states that women and men are both gifted with equal qualities and both of their contributions to the community are counted. He observes that:

Gender complementarity within tribal constructs arose out of the gendered division of labour. Because women were responsible for the bearing of and usually the caring for children, their work involved tasks that could be done close to the home. The men were responsible for protection of the community and also were able to travel farther away from the home to secure food and other necessities. Men and women had their assigned roles in tribal life, and women could be involved in numerous areas, such as decision making and land ownership. The important aspects of men and women's roles is that they complemented each other, and they were equally valued for the contributions they made to the community; one role did not have more importance than another. This general description of gender complementarity allows for many variations, as gender roles are social constructs, more importantly tribal constructs. (Hollrah 2)

Hollrah also states that unlike Christianity, Native spirituality includes both male and female gods. "Similar to the gender complementarity in the political arena, Native spirituality also represents both men and women. Unlike the monotheism of Christianity, Native spirituality incorporates male and female deities that complement one another, as in the case of Mother Earth and Father Sky (Hollrah 3). Louise Erdrich has also documented the idea of 'gender complementarity' in her novels by creating strong and independent female characters.

This paper is an attempt to view Native women endowed with enormous healing powers, insightful wisdom, medicine women, brave women, women as

hunters, women with trickster-like abilities. It would delve deep into the feminist celebration of native spirituality by employing spiritual ecofeminism in order to justify the inherent talents of the native women and their close connection to nature. Spiritual ecofeminists are inspired by nature-based spirituality and interrogate the rigid notions related to spirituality. They celebrate nature and "earth-based spiritualities" (Power 39). According to them nature and the female body are sacred entities. Starhawk and Carol Christ are two distinguished spiritual ecofeminists who have analyzed the women-nature relationship. According to Starhawk women with all feminine abilities can understand nature more than men. Spiritual ecofeminists are driven by certain beliefs and it has primarily three areas of concern; "a) Goddess worship b) Affectual knowledge c) Earth-based spiritualities" (Power 39). They worship Gaia or the Mother Earth. They believe that goddess exists in every being and then each being possesses the right to live. Focusing on harmony between human and nature spiritual ecofeminists advocate interconnectedness between everything which will help in the healing of mother Earth.

The novel *Tracks* celebrates the power and wisdom of native women in preserving their native heritage. Fleur Pillager is an enchanting character in the novel *Tracks* and is portrayed as the most beloved 'daughter of mother earth'. She is also the centre of gossip in the reservation for her immense wisdom on medicine and healing. She is the last of the Pillagers. According to Barton, "the Pillagers, who are of the bear clan and live beside Matchimanito Lake, are known for their sensitive hands, their penetrating gaze and wolf grin-and their power" (Barton 95). The members of the Pillager clan are known to have the power of medicines since the time of Fleur's grandmother Four Souls. Nanapush describes Fleur as, "She was wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan", the tribal police (Erdrich 3). It should be noted that the Pillagers are feared the most for their strength and abilities. As Fleur is a Pillager, no one dares to touch her and her assets. Pauline is a narrator in this novel who is the complete opposite of Fleur in her views and beliefs. According to Seema Kurup:

Fleur is a strong, independent full-blooded Ojibwe; Pauline is a weak, nervous, and confused mixed-blood. Fleur carries the pride that comes with her name-Pillager. Pauline cares little about her heritage and relinquishes her name for the name the Mother Superior at her convent has picked for her-Leopolda (205). Fleur's legacy lives on in the story of her life and through her daughter, Lulu. Pauline's only legacy is administering last rites to the dead of Argus... In sum Fleur is full of vitality, while Pauline is metaphorically, spiritually, emotionally, and culturally dead. (Kurup 42)

Fleur is a traditionalist and her spirituality is dictated by her connection to her land, nature, and reservation.

Fleur shares a sacred connection with the woods, and especially with Matchimanito lake that belongs to her ancestors. Fleur fights against the harmful forces which try to destroy the woods around the lake. Fleur Pillager is believed to have magical powers and therefore the natives do not roam in her land. People also believe that she can take away people's lives if she wants. Men do not come close to Fleur though she is beautiful. Even after drowning many times in the lake Matchimanito she always manages to survive and therefore people start to believe that Misshepesu, the water monster wants her as she is brave, beautiful, and strong. Regarding Fleur's connection to the water monster Pauline remarks, "Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepesu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself. He's a devil, that one, love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring, especially, the ones like Fleur" (Erdrich 11). Pauline's remark suggests that even the water God is attracted by Fleur's strength, aura and fierceness. According to Pauline, one cannot escape death by drowning "Unless you are Fleur Pillager" (Erdrich 11). Fleur's connection to the lake and the woods is a spiritual one. Fleur is a medicine woman, a protector of trees, a hunter, and one who can manage to survive in a critical situation.

Fleur is also considered a destroyer because when she leaves the reservation to live in Argus she almost destroys the town. Fleur goes to the town called Argus from the reservation to work at a butcher shop. In Argus,

Fleur becomes the subject of gossip amongst men for she is not just an expert in her work, she can play cards too. She surprises the men when she takes a seat beside them to play cards as women, in general, do not play with men. Gambling is of great importance in Chippewa tradition and Fleur, too, is an expert gambler. Regarding the significance of gambling, Pauline remarks, "In the heaven of the Chippewa there is gambling with spears of wood and rounded stones. There is gambling with deer knuckles, small brown bones, cards, dice, and human teeth... They play for drunkenness, or sorrow, or loss of mind. They play for ease, they play for penitence, and sometimes for living souls" (Erdrich 160). Fleur's skill in gambling is a manifestation of Chippewa power and heritage. She begins playing with three men who also work at the butcher shop. Pauline comments that: "Women didn't usually play with men, so the evening that Fleur drew a chair to the men's table there was a shock of surprise" (Erdrich 18). Those men are infuriated to see a woman who is so smart at playing. When the men realize that they do not have any chance in defeating Fleur, they try to abuse her. As a revenge of this humiliation, Fleur kills those men who tried to rape and kill her. Fleur fights her own battle and raises her voice against the atrocities on women.

According to Manju Kumari:

Fleur Pillager is seen gaining power, strength and identity by acknowledging the power of the ancestral spirits and her heritage that influenced her. When Fleur realises her identity, her inner and physical strength, acknowledges the impact her ancestors made the reverence for culture and heritage are essential to her life to make it a whole. She is endowed with magical touch, magical spells, magical spirit that connects her to the universe and helps her to find an identity.

(Kumari 87)

After killing those men Fleur returns to the reservation. Fleur's return from Argus to the lake is a mystery in the minds of the native people including Nanapush. Moreover, most of the people like the fact that she comes back as they believe that Fleur somehow manages to act as a controlling force around the lake, maintaining the ecological balance around there. Nanapush says: "There were some who declared they

were glad Fleur had come back because-we didn't like to think how she did this-she kept the lake thing controlled" (Erdrich 35). No one dares to cut down the trees in the lake area for their fear of Fleur. Fleur's aura frightens people and makes them curious as she is the one who survives the sickness which takes away almost all of her family members.

The novel depicts serious concern regarding lands in the reservation and women play a significant role in it. Once Nanapush and Margaret, Fleur's mother-in-law, encounter the mixed-blood Clarence Morrissey and an Indian named Boy Lazarre on their way to home from the mass and Clarence and Lazarre try to force Nanapush and Margaret to sign some papers and hand over their lands. Nanapush is aware of their intentions and wants to avoid them. But Margaret is ready to take up a fight as a result of which Margaret has to lose her braids as Lazarre cuts her hair. During the fight Margaret bites Lazarre. On reaching home, when Fleur asks Margaret what has happened to her hair, Margaret narrates the incident that happened on their way. Fleur, quite enraged at the act of Clarence and Lazarre, shaves her hair too. Fleur becomes impatient and goes to town, flaunting her bald head, and pays a visit to Morrissey house. As Fleur is known as a medicine woman among the natives, she frightens Clarence Morrissey with 'the bad medicine' (Erdrich 119) she sprinkles in the Morrissey house. Clarence is now sure that the medicine would take the lives of everyone in that house. Fleur then follows Lazarre and cuts his hair too. Later on, the wound from Margaret's bite kills Lazarre; the two women become the reasons for his death; thus Fleur saves the land and proves her loyalty as a traditional native woman.

The most important asset of Fleur's life is her ancestral land around the Matchimanito Lake and the woods. She is the emblem of Chippewa power, guided and saved by her guardian spirit. Along with her wisdom on traditional healing, she also saves many women as a midwife. The novel *Tracks* develops the character of Fleur as a fighter, a healer who would transcend her physical boundaries in order to achieve her goals. Fleur raises her voice against the destruction of nature, lands, and women. Fleur can be considered as a 'trickster' who can survive in any situation through her wisdom.

Fleur is both a human and a spirit, a mother and a trickster. She is the bear, the wolf and her connection with the water monster makes her mysterious.

In the novel *The Bingo Palace*, too, Fleur again appears as a magnificent character. Fleur is Lipsha's great grandmother. Lipsha both reveres and fears his great grandmother Fleur. She is gifted with a limitless life. It is said, "She takes the future of others and makes it her own, sucks it in through a hollow reed, through a straw, a bone" (Erdrich 128). Fleur is still a figure of mystery and fear among her people as when she is around weird things take place. Lipsha says:

They say that strange things happen when the old lady is around. A dog falls over dead and all of its hair drops out...Cold winds blow out of nowhere, in places there isn't even a fan system. Yellow jackets build a nest in a loaf of baking bread. And then those drowning: three times she was cast in the lake, an men were taken by the spirits each instance when she came to life, as if she put their name on the list to the death road, replacing hers. (Erdrich 126)

They are so terrified by her doings that they almost forget the good things she does for her people. Her entry into the town is also a topic of discussion as she hardly comes out from her den. She is the popular 'healing doctor witch' (Erdrich 126) who can cure any pain or fever. She is older than anyone on the reservation that no one remembers her age. She is known as 'the Old Lady, Mindemoya' (Erdrich 126) in the reservation. Lipsha says, "She must be a hundred. She's so old that people don't use her name anymore. She's just the Old Lady Mindemoya" (Erdrich 126). She is one of the finest Pillagers whose wisdom of healing and native tradition can surpass any age. The character of Fleur in Erdrich's novels can be considered from the lens of spiritual ecofeminism considering her approach of viewing the world around her. She is protective of nature and trees because of the spiritual connection she shares with nature. She fights back the stereotypical notions of the male-dominated society and stands for her rights. She is the one who does not observe any patriarchal God, rather she is deeply devoted to native spirituality and thinks of nature as a spirit itself. Fleur in a way reclaims and restores the sacred relationship between women and nature.

Conclusions:

Native women's role and efforts in preserving their heritage and tradition through their attitude of preserving and protecting nature are what make them the guardians of nature and native lands. Fleur, Lulu, Margaret are the representatives of thousands of native women whose sole purpose in life is dictated by their spiritual connection to nature. These women and their nature-friendly outlook flourish from their culture that believes in living in harmony with their surroundings. All the characters discussed in this section primarily indicate two important aspects regarding native women; one, they depict the unique identity of native women that celebrate their power and roles, two; they celebrate the profound relationship between women and nature as depicted in the novels of Erdrich. Moreover, women like Fleur, Lulu, along with other significant native women contribute enormously for their community by ensuring cultural 'survance' while also safeguarding the nature-human relationship.

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