

Mother-Childhood Relations and Social Heritage in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*: A Cultural Study

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Abstract

This study focuses on Louise Erdrich's third novel *Tracks* has published in 1988. This novel explores the connection between the Native Americans' loss of their ancestral lands and the loss of the motherly principles symbolized by Fleur, the main character of *Tracks*. As a result of the unjust laws of the United States government, Fleur is forced to give up her only child because she is forced to believe that losing her home and land means losing all other values, especially motherhood, which is tied to the land. Her land is rich in timber and other valuable herbs, and it is considered both a source of food and a source of personal pride. Cultural alienation results from the breakdown of the mother-child bond, especially on the part of the mother. The breakdown of the mother-child bond causes cultural alienation, particularly on the part of the youngster, who starts to despise and hate her mother and refuses to call her "mother."

Key words: Alienation, Motherhood relation, Social heritage, Tribal community.

Introduction

Louise Erdrich is an American novelist and poet. She also published novels for children's stories. Native American characters and places can be found throughout her works. She is also a Chippewa Indian and a member of the Turtle Mountain Band. Erdrich published a collaborated novel, *The Crown of Columbus*, in 1991. She also wrote a novel based on magic realism, titled as *The Antelope Wife*. In 1999, the world won the World Fantasy Award. In this book, to explore her German heritage, Erdrich employed the techniques of post-modernism as employed in the *Love Medicines*. She is one of the most important and celebrated Native American writers. She uses peculiar characters in her novels to find the different culture and religion of one specific group of Native Americans. Her novel *Tracks* connects the story of the lives and struggles of their Ojibwa people by telling the story of three main characters are Nanapush, Fleur, and Pauline as they fight against modern colonialism. Throughout her novel *Tracks* finds the four families are named as Kashpaw, Pillager, Nanapush and Puyat struggle to find out a balance of the old ways of their people and the aggressively encroaching influence of white civilization.

Louise Erdrich works in a post-modernist outlook. It employed multiple perspective characters along with complex timelines and shifts in point-of-view or narration to narrate the stories based on people of Ojibwe both in a historical and modern setting. One of the major characteristics of her works includes shared settings and characters. This characteristic is much like the character of works of William Faulkner. The writing style of Erdrich is narrative and indirectly points out the oral traditions of Native American culture. She describes her technique of writing as "storyteller." The following are the characteristics of the writing style of Louise Erdrich.

Native American novelist Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* demonstrates the close connection between motherhood and Indian land. The fragmentation of tribal and familial structures in Indian society in general, and the long-lasting bond between mothers and children in particular, are all strongly illustrated in this story as a result of land loss. In this sense, identity and belonging have their roots in the land. Another displacement occurs on the mothering level as a result of the loss of the land. Mothers were compelled to abandon their children after losing their ancestral or tribal lands because they were unable to provide for them financially or mentally. It appears that the loss of Native land begins to signify the loss of the Indian people's traditional natural home, which has the effect of modifying the prevalent traditional values.

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* highlights the complicated and tense familial and communal interactions in Chippewa and Anglo cultures, particularly in her novels. According to Vizenor (p. 9), the Chippewa emphasises the family as "the basic political and economic unit in the woodland and the primary source of personal identity," which is reflected in the different mother images that emerge in the novels. On the Chippewa sense of self, Basil Johnston observes that "men and women preferred to regard themselves as members of a totem and then a community" (p. 8). This point of view stems from the Chippewa people's extended family totem groups and community. Johnston continues, "A totem animal [served as] each person's family mark" and states that the majority of Chippewa communities "consisted of extended family members united by a common totem" (pp. 8-28).

Therefore, the reason Fleur has such a close bond with her land is that it not only serves as a physical location where she can find sustenance but also serves as a symbol of a spiritual and cultural heritage that links her to her ancestors and

shapes her very essence. Peterson notes that Tracks “refocuses attention on the emotional and cultural repercussions that the loss of land entails” (p. 987). In this context, Fleur endures physical and spiritual hardships while making great efforts to preserve her country. Nanapush saved her from starvation and death, and she went to work in Argus to pay the taxes due on her farm. She chooses to play cards with the men in the butcher’s shop to make extra money because her salaries are insufficient for this.

Fleur wins exactly one dollar every night while playing for weeks on end. The men start to believe Fleur is cheating as they lose their bets for weeks and start to get upset about it. They therefore resolve to finally beat her by punishing her by increasing the stakes. Still, Fleur prevails in the final match. When the game concludes, she decides to leave, but the inebriated males get upset. They pursue her and start beating her because they want to get revenge for their injured manhood, and eventually they end up raping her. Fleur returns to her homeland and informs no one about her experience in Argus. She never discusses it. People only receive a description of what transpired thanks to Pauline. Fleur responds, “Uncle, the Puyat lies,” when Nanapush informs her that Pauline makes up stories about her (*Tracks*, p. 38). As readers, we are left in the dark as to whether Fleur was raped or if Pauline’s imagination was the only thing that depicted the abuse.

This generation has lost a significant portion of its cultural and social heritage and has started to live in a state of alienation or lack of belonging because they have lost their natural connections with their mothers, which has led to a significant change in the real, traditional meaning of “motherhood.” It is only Erdrich’s novel *Tracks* that attempts to delve deeper into the causes of this corruption or change that overturns this sacred relationship between mother and child and its connection to the disappearance of the land, despite the fact that most of Erdrich’s novels highlight the destruction of motherhood, which is seen as an inevitable doom. He contends that *Tracks* shows how the research strives to explain how conventional ideas of motherhood and home have changed and how the loss of the land becomes the apex of that transformation.

Tracks reveals the story of the loss of a Chippewa mother’s land, Fleur, and her furious attempts to recover it. It is “lauded as Erdrich’s most ‘Indian’ novel in respect to both historical and tribal issues” (Wilson, p. 17). By snapping, Fleur experiences spiritual and psychological isolation, which causes her to become estranged from her family and spouse and causes her to abandon her daughter Lulu. As a result, Fleur loses her former Indian identity and is socially isolated. *Tracks* also tell the subplot of Pauline, a mixed-blood woman who suffers injustices and whose family has lost their land and, thus, their clan. Pauline joins the group because she lacks a clan and no land. She abandons her child (Marie) after losing her sense of motherhood because she does not want the latter to introduce her to a group of people who view her as an outsider.

Tracks depict how the same tribe splits into factions of “tribal loyalists,” like Fleur, who opposes selling the land, and “mixed blood progressives,” like some natives known as the Morrisseys and Lazarres, who think that selling their ancestral land is their only chance of surviving (Wilson, p. 28). Despite the fact that Pauline is landless, she can be seen as one of the “progressives” because of the way she feels about her native history. *Tracks* is now the only book in Erdrich’s collection that defines the conventional ideas of home in relation to the native region because of its “traditionalism”. Before losing it, it shows people living in their ancestral land.

The Ojibwe or Chippewa tribe of Fleur Pillegar and the Anishinaabe (Erdrich herself is from this tribe) and their battle to survive the sufferings of the eventual loss of their Native territory are the two tribes or clans that are examined in the novel. Native Americans, including the Anishinaabe, relied on their land to provide them with food and a place to live. Land also serves as a spiritual foundation for them and a repository for myths and tales. Consequently, they have a very close relationship with their land. A natural relationship begins within the hazy, generative womb of Mother Earth, according to Indians, who think they were created there. The attachment is compared to the spiritual connection.

As depicted in the story, European American wood firms have been stripping the “last” fertile area (the Pillegars’ wealthy timberland). Nanapush, Erdrich’s narrator, effectively emphasizes the term “last” as she recounts the tale of her mother and tribe to Fleur’s daughter:

I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the [last] buffalo hunt. I saw the [last] bear shot. I trapped the [last] heaver with a pelt of more than two year’s 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] Pillagers. (2)

As the previous statement demonstrates, Erdrich substitutes Nanapush for the Native mother, a fairly customary practice, who teaches her children tales from the past. He starts the narrative by describing to Lulu how his tribe has perished overall and his family, in particular, has perished due to consumption, one of the diseases that contact with the Whites has caused them to contract. He says, “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (1). The illness that kills Fleur’s family also kills her. He recounts to Lulu the tale of Fleur, her mother, whom the girl seemed to be reluctant to even “call mother” (2).

Nanapush hopes that by placing the kid in a specific historical context, she may be able to comprehend the reasons for her mother’s abandonment of her. At the same time, he wants to encourage her to “learn about that history” and establish a bond with that “traditional time” that connects her to her ancestors. He states her:

Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared, when, along with the first bitter punishment of early winter, a new sickness swept down. The consumption it was called...Whole families of your relatives lay ill and helpless in its breath on the reservation, where we were forced close together, the clans dwindled. Our tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among were taken. (1-2)

Since it appears that the young woman is unaware of these happenings, Nanapush has the duty to teach her about the value of her land and her mother's position in an effort to preserve her former Indian identity. The introduction of the foreign idea of ownership that "marginalizes the Chippewa culture by valorizing individual ownership over shared and unowned [sic] land" (Angely, p. 159) appears to have perverted the Ojibwa or Chippewa people's cultural sense and caused them to become less aware of their own heritage. As a result, the Native Indians enter a confined space that is foreign to them. Therefore, the emergence of Euro-American civilization, which brought about the imposition of these two Acts, has divided the people not only from one another but also from the tribal land. It instructs each local to make money at the expense of their own loved ones.

For instance, in *Tracks*, Margaret Kashpaw and her son Nector decide to use the entire amount of money to pay the taxes on their own land despite the fact that they are related to Fleur (they are her in-laws) and as a result, they were able to keep it. By acting greedily, the Kashpaws, not only betray Fleur, but they also drive Nanapush and Fleur away. Erdrich wants to demonstrate here that Natives come to behave against their nature and tradition, or in other words, they become alienated from their own culture, which is based on a mutual sense of responsibility and selflessness. By behaving greedily, the Kashpaws not only betray Fleur but also force her to abandon her only child after making her run out of alternatives.

Therefore, Fleur represents this idea of reunification between the Indian American and her or his land or home in *Tracks*. According to Wong, "feeling at home" in the traditional sense means being aware of one's connections to their social, geographic, and cosmic networks, as well as their direct and extended family (p. 177). This feeling of "unification" has been shattered by Fleur's land loss, which has left her in the middle of nowhere. Thus, *Tracks* depicts the effects of losing the land, particularly on individuals who are resistant to adapting to White society while also holding the view that no other location can provide them with the same sense of identity and belonging as their ancestral homeland.

Tracks features Fleur Pillager and Pauline Puyat as two powerful female characters. Fleur is the last member of her family, descended from the Bear clan, as the others perished from starvation and diseases. It has become her duty to protect her land and all that it stands for, both as the only survivor of her clan and in keeping with the role her mother served before her. Fleur Pillager is "the exemplification of traditional Chippewa power, and she owes her power to her spirit guardian, Misshepesu, the water spirit man," according to Annette Van Dyke in her essay "Questions of the Spirit: Bloodlines in Louise Erdrich's Chippewa Landscape" (p. 17).

According to Peterson, *Tracks* "refocuses attention on the emotional and cultural repercussions that the loss of land entails" (p. 987). In this regard, Fleur struggles to maintain her farm while also going through bodily and spiritual hardships. She left to work in the city of Argus to pay the taxes on her land after Nanapush prevented her from starving to death and saved her life. Her pay is insufficient for this, so she decides to play cards with the men in the butcher shop in order to make some more cash. Fleur gambles for weeks, winning exactly one dollar every evening. The guys start to lose their cool after weeks of losing their bets, and they start to suspect Fleur of cheating.

Fleur doesn't reveal anything about her experience in Argus when she returns to her homeland. She never discusses it. The only way for people to obtain a description of what had occurred is through Pauline. Fleur responds with "Uncle, the Puyat lies" when Nanapush informs her that Pauline fabricates tales about her (*Tracks*, p. 38). As readers, we are unable to determine if Fleur was actually raped or whether Pauline's vivid imagination was the only source of the violation.

Fleur's decision to remain silent about the rape (if it actually occurs) could be seen as a form of self-sacrifice. She is aware that it is her duty to preserve her land and the Chippewa culture that it contains. Her ultimate goal is to safeguard her homeland for a time, and if she is unable to defend herself, she succeeds. Fleur's ability to maintain her farm gives her the power to wed Eli Kashpaw and have a family. Fleur feels overwhelmed by the birth of Baby Lulu, especially since she sees a clan continuation and resemblance in her. Lulu is described by Pauline as:

She had the Kashpaws' unmistakable nose, too wide and squashed on the tip. She was goodlooking. She had Fleur's coarse, quick-growing hair. Sheer black. She got teeth early, pointed to them with her fat, alert fingers, seemed proud of their sharpness and number. She always demanded to be held, so she was carried in arms till the second summer of her life. (*Tracks*, p.70)

The connections between those family members are altered by Lulu's presence in the lives of her mother in particular and the rest of the family, including her father Eli, Nanapush, grandmother Margaret, and uncle Nector. Margaret, who largely struggles with accepting Fleur as her daughter-in-law, moves into Fleur's cabin. She may keep the infant in her arms constantly or tie her up in an old shawl and force her to sit through Benediction. As a result, Lulu gives these folks the impression that they are "sort of a clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new" (70).

Pauline, the narrator of these events, feels very envious of Fleur since she provides for her child in the finest possible ways. The toddler “kept up a constant and annoying string of song and talk, which the others laughed at and indulged,” according to Pauline’s narration of Fleur’s visit to teach Lulu so many words in a short period of time (76). At the same time, Fleur starts taking extra care to dress Lulu nicely. Even though the toddler is playing in the dirt, she is donning tiny red beaded bracelets and floral-embroidered doeskins moccasins. Her green dress is fastened around her midsection by a leather belt (76). These instances highlight Fleur’s love and devotion to her child. Although the child is playing in the dirt, she is wearing little red bead bracelets and doeskins moccasins that are embroidered with floral patterns. Her green dress is fastened around her midsection by a leather belt (76). These instances highlight Fleur’s love and devotion to her child. As her child grows up in the Pillagers’ territory and is surrounded by the deep love of her extended family, Fleur begins to feel incredibly proud of her.

Fleur is compelled to leave her beautiful child Lulu as a result of her actions since she is no longer able to protect her. Many years later, Nanapush explains Lulu about the reasons:

She[Fleur] sent you to the government school, it is true, but you must understand there were reasons: there would be no place for you, no safety on this reservation, no hiding from government papers, or from Morrisseys who shaved heads or Turcot Company, leveler of a whole forest. There was no predicting what would happen to fleur herself. (p.219)

Fleur experiences a form of estrangement as a result of being misled by family members and losing her wealthy wood land. Eli, her husband, extends an invitation to move in with him on the Kashpaws’ property, but she turns it down. She is actually no longer with her husband because she is unable to forgive him for betraying his family and cannot get past it. Fleur loses her sense of motherhood when she loses her land since they both depend on and feed off of one another. The conventional notion of motherhood has been altered in this way, leaving children in an unprecedented state of motherlessness. Consequently, a fresh idea of mother emerges: the “adaptive mother,” which Erdrich adopts as a substitute for the conventional or natural mother in her other writings.

Tracks also features Pauline, another young mother. Like Fleur, she refuses to even look at or acknowledge her newborn daughter Marie and abandons her after she is born. She is a symbol for the skewed mother-child bond that emerged from the native Indians being forced to adopt Euro-American society. Pauline attempts to abort the child after learning she is pregnant: “since I had already betrothed myself to God, I tried to force it out of me, to punish, to drive it from my womb” (p.131). Pauline tries unsuccessfully to abort the baby in a number of methods. When labour begins, Pauline turns into “something tight, round, and very black clenched around my child so that she won’t give birth.” She also resists giving birth. Pauline tries to murder herself and the child by keeping the latter in. She says, “I sat up suddenly and gripped the top rails of the bed.” I tricked her, lied to her, and allowed her spasms to pass (p. 135).

Bernadette Morrissey, Pauline’s mother-mentor, assists with the birth of Baby Marie. Pauline’s arms are secured to the bed rails by the latter, while her legs are fastened to the bedstead by her ankles. Then, using handmade forceps fashioned from black iron frying spoons, she extracts the infant from her unaccommodating mother (p. 135).

Pauline would be a wonderful illustration of how native Indians are internally breaking down. Her family has consequently become like outsiders and has lost their position in the local community.

Victim of cultural alienation, Pauline turns to a twisted form of Catholicism. In an attempt to fit in as an integrated Catholic, she turns to self-torture. She creates novel penance techniques that are unknown to even the most devout, such as walking in her shoes backwards, wearing chafing pants made of potato sacks, permitting herself to urinate just twice a day—once in the morning and once at night—and forgoing self-washing (p.152). “Set an example for other girls from this region to guide them, to purify their minds, and to mould them in my own image” (p. 205) becomes her primary responsibility.

Fleur initially defends her homeland but ultimately must pay more. Payment arrives at the exact moment that she is in her most difficult situation. She recently lost a child and was extremely weak, both physically and spiritually. Despite this, Fleur and the rest of her family put in a lot of effort to avoid paying taxes to the Kashpaws and Pillagers. As their final resort, they return to Fleur’s fertile farm and deplete it of its remaining herbal supplies. Cranberry bark, quill boxes, fish powder, and animal pelts are among the items they gather and later sell. However, the money was insufficient to purchase the territory owned by the Pillagers and the Kashpaws. Margaret and her son Nector had spent all the money to save their own, making Fleur lose hers after discovering that there was not enough money to pay the taxes on both lands.

Conclusion

Louise Erdrich’s works generally and *Tracks* in particular deal with the very fundamental topic of motherhood. As a female author, Erdrich is worried about how women are portrayed in her novels. She strengthens them to withstand life’s challenges by adhering to her Ojibwe background, where women hold a powerful position in the community. With a few notable exceptions, such as Nanapush in this instance, the men in her stories accept impending fate in their lives, but the women approach the same issues from a different perspective. Hertha D. Wong argues in her essay “Adoptive Mothers and Thrown-Away Children in the Novels of Louise Erdrich” that Native American women have

been connected to the preservation of tribal traditions for generations, both through childbearing and through the victim's transmission of cultural values in stories (1). Beth Brant challenges the idea of the indigenous women as "helpless victim", she says "we are freedom fighters... we are healers. This is not anything new. For centuries it has been so" (12-13).

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