

Contextualizing Culture and Ecology in the Changing Dynamics of Native American Life: A Reading of Select Texts of Louise Erdrich

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Abstract: Human responses to environment are determined by language, culture, practices and values. Cultures have profound impacts on human perception that is why our environment is shaped by our cultural assumptions or cultural interpretations. Culture, again can also be interpreted in terms of its physical environment. This relation between culture and ecology has been one of the important subjects of discourse for the anthropologists and sociologists to come up with ‘cultural ecology’, a term coined by American Anthropologist Julian Steward. This paper is an attempt to understand the relationship between culture and ecology in the platform of rapid changes that the Native people of America have gone through. This relation would definitely help in bridging the gap between past and present, ancient and modern, as culture is instrumental in connecting human beings to its roots. In terms of Native American life and culture, ecology plays a very crucial role, and, this paper offers the possibility of understanding culture in relation to ecology or vice versa. This study is an attempt to observe the changes because of the intervention of modernity, yet reviving and bringing back the lost cultural ethos through a structural pattern with special reference to Louise Erdrich’s works.

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Culture and ecology play a vital role both in Native American life and Literature for the fact that culture is the most important factor that does not only maintain a close relationship among the natives, it also helps in providing and maintaining ecological balance. The ecological perspective to view this region explores a different dimension of this land and offers an identity that is not layered or confused. With the advent of modernization, this region has gone through a lot of changes, yet there are always efforts on the part of the natives to preserve their cultural norms and traditions.

To understand Native America one must understand its culture and ecology as it adds a different picture to this diverse land of various tribes. On the one hand it is the story of the innocent native people who fear changes and transformation; on the other hand it is the story of the people who seem fighting the clashes of two different cultures. Erdrich has beautifully portrayed the intriguing stories of the natives. She has articulated their beliefs and traditional wisdom that dictate their lives. Nature is like a reminder for them. It is a reminder of their age old belief system, traditional wisdom and culture. Nature helps them in telling stories, the stories of survival, the stories of adjustment and the stories of living in

harmony. The relationship between man and non-human world has recently been a glorious subject in the environmental discourse. Christopher Manes, the famous author of *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* was of the view that “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes 26). But the arrival of environmental studies has given a voice to this ‘non human world’, in a simple term ‘nature’.

“Literary studies in our postmodern age exist in a state of constant flux” says Glotfelty. The aspects of environment and ecology have been ignored throughout ages. The relevance of environmental studies has very well been portrayed in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Literary studies have ignored the issue of environmental crisis. “Literary studies have apparently remained untinted by environmental concerns” (Glotfelty xvi). Hence the efforts were there in the area of ‘ecologically informed criticism’.

Regarding the definition of ecocriticism Glotfelty has said, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical

environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). From this perspective, ecocriticism is concerned with man and its surroundings. It tends to approach the literary texts from an ecocritical point of view. However ‘ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it’ (Glotfelty xix). From this aspect, both physical environment and the existence of human beings are related to each other through a peculiar bond. “Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism also incorporates culture and cultural products (art works, writing, scientific theories etc) in the study of eco literature and is connected in the same way with the human relationship to the natural world. Regarding the terms ‘environmental writing’ and ‘nature writing’, Dr. Marks has said, “I use the term ‘environmental writing’ more than ‘nature writing’ because I am interested in writers concerned with natural as well as cultural experience” (qtd. in Shikha 2). It should be noted that all the human cultures are very much influenced by the nature or the surroundings. It cannot be separated from nature. That is why any action or harm towards nature is actually a harm towards the culture itself. Scott Slovic in his article “Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology” has suggested that, “to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature and sometimes about how the mind sees itself” (Slovic 194). So, nature writing is a representation of our own attitude towards nature. He is also of the view that, “Both nature and writing demand and contribute to an author’s awareness of self and non-self” (Slovic 195). Both nature and writing make the author realize of his own self, of his own world. It is a realization that protects the self and enables the man to understand his surroundings in a better way. “Ecocriticism endeavor to understand the

culture as developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis often by analyzing the history of concepts such as ‘nature’. Direct representations of environmental damage or political struggle are of obvious interest to ecocritics. They re-read major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with a particular attention to the representation of the natural world. Ioan Davies in his essay “Society and Culture” has discussed culture and the thoughts centred around this. He said, “In its totality culture can be said to represent the living styles of a society or groups of societies, which is an all-encompassing definition more often used by anthropologists and in need of specification” (Davies 141). He has also illustrated the relationship of society to its cultural norms. In the works of many Native American writers have a relationship between land and nature as its informing principle. The influence of Native American expression in their works is always present. The influence is largely formed by the landscape tradition of the Native American. The extent of that tradition is of vital importance in the comprehension of the relationship which the Native American had, and continues to have, with the American landscape. The ecological rootedness of the tribes does not hint at primitivism, rather it shows their closeness with their surroundings. This study from the ecological point of view has opened a dimension that leads the region towards a new positive formation. Through these novels we find that the ecological aspects have become instrumental in celebrating the uniqueness, the ecology of the region. The writers, through their concern with oral tradition have tried to convey the need to record their oral culture and tradition. Louise Erdrich’s novels have fairly documented the shared history and knowledge of the tribes. Ecology has played a crucial role in their quest for identity, traditional knowledge and values. Its ecology provides a common ground to the writers to portray the region appropriately. The overwhelming presence of nature in their works can be said as a conscious effort on the part of the writers to leave a meaningful message to the world. The people have to assert their identity in order to create a ‘space’ and ‘place’ for themselves. “It is quite interesting to note that the ecology of the region is one of the strongest weapons for all such negotiation”.

Both nature and culture play a dominant role in Native American Literature. Nature becomes instrumental in creating and shaping one's identity. Rivers, forests and mountains are not only elements of nature; rather they offer uniqueness to the very process of identity formation. This paper is also an attempt to offer a critique of the colonial attitude towards environment. While the colonizers are interested in a material relationship with nature, in the case of the native people this relation is pristine and spiritual. The writers of the region consciously attempts to deal with ecological degradation and preservation in their writings. There is always an effort on the part of the native writers to revive the roots that is lost to them. Their writings on their myths and folklore are not mere 'romantic escapism' but this is an attempt to bring back their past that has gone through layers of cultural changes. Native American communities have preserved, among themselves, a unique spirit of harmony between nature and culture, art and life, martial ardor and emotional and spiritual calm, maintenance of biodiversity and cultural diversity. They have articulated the spirit of balance in many different ways, in art and architecture, in their belief and knowledge systems, in their life sustaining rites and rituals in response to the rhythm of work, seasons and nature. This is such a region which continues with the age old customs, beliefs, and manners along with certain aspects of modernity. They always try to maintain a balance between tradition and modernity. When we talk about the Native Americans as a whole they are the result of hundreds of thousands of different tribes with unique cultural practices. The language also varies from tribe to tribe. Environment has also influenced their ways of presenting and celebrating. Story telling tradition is a part and parcel of Native American people, this tradition rightly reflects the changes and the beliefs that the natives follow and show their reverence. Each tribes have their own stories and both cultural similarities and dissimilarities. Those stories were found in the oral form and they have lost their originality as they had to come across multiple narrators. Whatever the fact is no one can deny that those stories cannot lose their essence if only interpreted from a native's experience and world view. Native American Literature is a combination of novels, myths, stories, songs written by

the Native American people. Though the literature of each tribe is specific and unique, they can be united under certain common grounds, i.e. most of the Native American novels possess the theme of cultural conflict as a primary thematic concern. This conflict arises from their inability to cope with the western tradition and disorientation with their native cultural heritage. Most of the Native American authors have brilliantly expressed and described this cultural conflict in their works with different approaches. Writers like Momaday and Silko have been portraying this conflict by vehemently asserting their identity, where as Louise Erdrich is trying to maintain her both native and western ways. In her novels we see the coexistence of both these traditions, so that one can critique the other. So her approach for the long race of identity assertion can be considered as different and challenging. The Native American authors are more interested in presenting the Native experiences through familial bonding. Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* is such a novel where the stories are trapped in the web of family ties and relationships. *Tracks* is lauded as Erdrich's most "Indian" novel in respect to both historical and contemporary tribal issues and its emphasis on Native characters and community. This novel takes us back to the early 20th century at the formation of reservations. It shows the conflict between native tradition and Roman Catholic Church. In *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich tells the story of a displaced community severed from their home, land, and traditions. When Fleur sends Lulu to boarding school, Lulu is also displaced and removed from her culture. When she returns, Lulu's appearance reflects her cultural alienation. Nanapush's purpose in storytelling is to reconnect Lulu to her culture, to ground her in tribe and tradition, thus ensuring the continuation of cultural tradition in future generations. As Nanapush assumes the role of storyteller, he also takes part in maintaining cultural values. The traditional wisdom of Nanapush marks him as the guardian and preserver of native culture and tribal heritage. Nanapush grounds Lulu in her personal and cultural past. *Tracks* generally builds on this pattern to evoke a sense of cultural origin. This novel beautifully portrays the influence of Western way of life over the tradition. In *Tracks*, the writer has also focused on the importance of tribal land and allotments in preserving their heritage and native

identity. Therefore, Nanapush said, "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life" (Erdrich 33). Throughout the novel the characters express their fear of losing their age old lands and cultural heritage. The native's reverence for their surroundings actually makes them different from the West. Their culture is connected to nature and their beliefs they seem to preserve and celebrate. The novel also expresses the deeper ecological concerns of the native people. That is why there are characters in the novel who lament over losing the trees. Nanapush was such a character who was always concerned about the changes they had to go through.

When we talk about the wisdom of the natives, their wisdom on medicine can be considered as one of their possessions. It was something that the native people practiced and wanted to share this wisdom with the younger generation. As time passed there were very few natives who actually knew the use of those medicines or practiced them. Fleur was such a character in the novel who was expert in this art and because she knew their uses, she was considered as a witch by the members of the community. That is why the narrator Pauline said, "She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about" (Erdrich 12).

One of the most crucial aspects in the novel is the influence of the whites and the influence of modernity in the lives of the native people. They never seemed to appreciate their contract with the whites or the ways of the whites. There was a time in the reservation when many natives (Chippewas) were taken to the South, the town of the whites. This act of sending them off was an act most of the natives did not approve of. That is why Pauline's father on sending her daughter to the White town replied, "You'll fade out there"... "You won't be an Indian once you return" (Erdrich 14). Her father's reply clearly suggests his opinion regarding the native's assimilation with the whites. This assimilation is not just a threat to their land, but a threat to their culture and their identity.

The natives have had a way to deal with nature, to deal with their environment. Their relationship with nature is something more than a consumerist relationship. They had a special way of governing nature with their belief system. As instance: certain areas like the area around Matchimanito were never disturbed by the community members. The hunters resisted hunting there because they believed the stories attached with that. Those stories were made not just to keep the villagers away but to maintain an ecological balance. This way with nature has always been preserved among the natives.

Love Medicine is Erdrich's first and nationally acclaimed novel. The text simultaneously serves as the seminal text of the entire North Dakota saga. Louise Erdrich, the youngest of these names, works closely with themes of culture, tradition, and identity with depth and complexity in her novel *Love Medicine*. Using both traditional Anishinabe narrative methods and Euro American form, Erdrich produces a text that is rich in its commentary on the state of the American Indian cultural revolution that began in the 1970s. Communal identity takes centre stage from the start of the novel. Lazarres, Lamartines, Kashpaws, and Johnsons constitute a tribe in their own right, operating both inside and outside of tradition and bringing both diversity and unity to one another and to their culture. Louise Erdrich utilizes elements of her native heritage in order to tell a beautiful, painfully human story.

In the novel she portrays stories through familial bonding. Undoubtedly, each character's story was different and painful, but they beautifully depicted their native wisdom, their sense of belongingness to the woods, their search for identity, their efforts to keep their Indianness and most importantly the effect of modernity to the native way of life. The novel is interesting because of certain juxtapositions created by the author. When we see the character Like Eli who was fully aware of the ways with the woods, there were also character like Nector grown up "knowing white reading and writing" (Erdrich 19). There were also instances of mothers who were proud of their children being brought up in an Indian way.

When we see the characters celebrating their heritage, growing up embracing both the native and

white ways of life, we also see characters who understand the threats coming on their way, coming on their land. This is a threat their tradition, a threat that tends to shatter their link to their roots. That is why some characters put emphasis on learning their own heritage. Lynette said, "They've got to learn their own heritage! When you go it will all be gone" (Erdrich 32).

It should be noted that the Native American understanding of nature can actually be presented by a native's worldview and his knowledge rather than a outsider. Their relationship with nature is seen in every stages of their existence, in their ways of living and celebrating culture. That is why the native's worldview regarding their nature is not similar to a non-native's perspective. That is why Paula Gunn Allen has said, "The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves)where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies. It is not a means of survival, a setting for our affairs.....It is rather a part of our being, dynamic significant, real. It is our self..." (Allen 230). David Rich Lewis was of the view that

They defined themselves by the land , by the sacred places that bounded and shaped their world. They recognized a unity in their physical and spiritual universe, the union of natural and supernatural. Their origin cycles, oral traditions, and cosmologies connected them with all animate and inanimate beings, past and present (Lewis 423).

Randall Hill discusses American Indian literary diversity and says of native writers that "theirs is a literature of polarities—Indian versus white, [and] tradition versus change, primitive versus civilization..." (132). Although Hill is specifically discussing literary patterns in American Indian literature in general, it is also a useful definition of the state of Indian culture and value systems represented in *Love Medicine*. There is a constant opposition from within the reservation community in which the novel is primarily set, as well as influences from more mainstream cultural value systems that create diversity within the lives of Erdrich's characters. Although no character in the novel is described as being one

hundred percent Indian, some embrace traditional modes of existence more than others and some fall into a space of enhanced hybridity that bridges the internal Indian and the external Euro American worlds. *Love Medicine* conforms to Hill's ideas about hybridity and tension in American Indian literature as a whole.

Louise Erdrich is not presenting Native Americans in their original form, as people leading their life in harmony with nature rather she depicts a cultural milieu which has lost its strict adherence to practice and perform the rituals and ceremonies ritualistically. Sacred ceremonies, tribal rituals and their cultural identity have disappeared when they stepped into the reservation. Marvin Magalaner in the essay "Louise Erdrich: Of Cars, Time, and the River" discusses the changes that creep into the tribe and their culture writes, "The noble savage becomes in this book, realistically enough, the ignorable citizen, reduced by externally imposed economic circumstances and blandishments of media persuasion to a mean, degraded lowest common denominator of existence"(Witalec 176:98). We should understand the Native American perception of the ecological world as a complex and multifaceted form, then only we can begin to understand the effect that this perception has had upon Native American expression. In this process we'll be able to get a redefinition of environment not as an object but as a subject. Through this relationship between the land and the environment the Native Americans developed a distinct and unique "landscape tradition" and formed a particularly close union with culture and nature.

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