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Towards Harmonizing the Mythic and The Modern in Erdrich's Tracks: A Magical Realist Perspective

Abstract

This article is an endeavor to provide an insight into Native American novelist Louise Erdrich's use of the magical-realist technique in an attempt to harmonize the mythic and modern conceptions of reality represented by the Native American and Euro American subjects, respectively. The article demonstrates that in an attempt to seek a way possible to intertwine the two cultures, to wed the Native and the European ideologies of the world into accommodative space and to strike out the all-pervasive differences between the two people inhabiting the same land, Erdrich delves into the structuring principles of each culture's conceptualizing and internalizing the reality and the faith in it, and presents them as simultaneous albeit contrary versions of the same events, suggesting the possibility of simultaneous and harmonious co-existence of the two views, each retaining its essential outlook and yet respecting and accommodating the other. Employing Bower and Paula Gunn Allen's theoretical postulations of magical realism as a particular discourse embedded in the mythic and cultural beliefs of the Native American subjects, the article explores the mythic and modern formulations of female identity in Native American magical-realist fiction Tracks.

Key Words: Magical Realism, Myth, Native American Woman, Oral Tradition, Storytelling.

Introduction

Since the course of action open to Native American women writers to make their voices heard and explode into the world consciousness, especially to dominant Western/American academic and political circles, was to make use of the dominant discourse's language (though hybridizing it by conflating it with the local dialects) so that they could access the consciousness of the dominant power, they did so so seamlessly and ingeniously that they represented themselves, their culture and ideological apparatus so differently yet plausibly. What they have precisely gained by so doing is that their discourses are not only successfully initiated into the consciousness of the dominant power but have also simultaneously articulated heterogeneity of their voices and cultures, which was earlier confined within the generalizing and essentialist dominant ideologies.

This article explores the textual and theoretical accounts of the Native American mythic and modern formulations of female identity to analyzing as fully as possible what it is really that happens when the colored women writers become engaged in representing their own perspectives about the world they live in and refuse to believe in what has already been constructed by the dominant forces for them to believe in. Questioning the validity and authority of the knowledge claims (often universal and essentialist) of the dominant discursive and ideological practices that form the essence of the consciousness, these women writers have extrapolated indigenous concepts conceived either directly as a relation to the objects and people or a pervading quality of socio-cultural phenomenon they are part of. The reasons this study shall furnish in favor of its argument will be mainly derived from both the Western and Black feminist theoretical positions taken by the principal theorists this article has chosen for this project and the primary texts of the Native American women writer, Louise Erdrich.

To understand the relationship between magical realism and the (re)construction of feminine identity in Native American female writing, it is significant to have a comprehensive knowledge of the

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ways the Euro American writings about Native women have constructed the female identity of the colored women in stereotypical images that the contemporary women writers of the colored nations attempt to dismantle by enlisting alternativism to emphasize their unique identity. Defying essentializing white discourses that portray colored women in negative stereotypes, the women writers from the suppressed nations portray fresh images of the colored women using mostly postmodern narrative techniques, magical realism being one of the frequently used narrative forms that helps them dissolve the ossified binaristic boundaries between black and white, rational and irrational, central and marginal, realistic and the magical.

Literature Review

[Bower's \(2005\)](#) discussion of Magical realism as a particular discourse embedded in the mythic and cultural beliefs of the practitioners of the non-epistemological conception of reality involves a new dimension that heralds a fundamentally differential "way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy, expressed in many post-colonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction"(p. 1). Since Native oral storytelling tradition remains an indispensable component of the magical realist mode of narration that artistically blends the real and the magical/mythic, one of the most respectable writers and theorist of Native literature, Paula Gunn [Allen \(1986\)](#), tracing this link between modern Native fiction and the tradition of tribal storytelling, adds another vital dimension- that of heroic resistance and traumatic history of Native resistance against the corrosive hydra-headed invasion of the white forces- and says:

The oral tradition from which contemporary poetry and fiction take significance and authenticity has, since contact with the people, been a major force in Indian resistance. It has kept the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions and their connection to the land of her creatures. Contemporary poets and writers take a cue from the oral tradition, to which they return continuously for the structure and motivating impulse as well as for the philosophic bias that animates our work. (p. 86)

Rawdon Wilson relates the spiritual tradition in Native American women's writings with the modern writing technique, magic realism. He argues that Native American women writers, using their traditional oral tales, fashion their transcendental historicity – social and cultural embedment – that is beyond the textual space ([Wilson, 1985, p. 220](#)). However, this magical realism is just a literary technique for Louise Erdrich, Ojibwa, to express her native reality. She argues:

The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don't seem unreal to me. Unusual, yes, but I was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable. I think the term [magical realism] is one applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world. ([Chavkin & Chavkin, 1994, p. 221](#))

The engagement of the many leading modern Native American writers, including Scott Momaday, Leslie Mormon, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Viznor, etc. in involving the audience in their fictions based on oral traditions, according to folklorist Kathleen E.B. [Manley \(2002\)](#), is because of their being influenced by their own oral traditions. The difference between the targeted audience in oral and written discourse lies in the presence and absence of the audience: oral narration necessitates the presence of the audience while written text imagines the existence of the audience. Following the requirements of the respective audience, the two traditions function within their sphere of influence, and the specificity of their respective influence is determined accordingly. Since the oral tradition involves a communal sense in the performativity of the oral narrative action, the Native writers, in their written texts, incorporating the essentials of the oral dramatic action, invoke the interest of the audience on the common, shared grounds of the experience. Reading the magical realist accounts of the world and the characters with which they are familiar with and whose feelings and experiences they share intrinsically, the audience of the Native American writers, far from feeling estranged from the world being depicted, become absorbed and influenced in the narrative performativity of the storytelling which is heavily influenced by the oral elements. The uniqueness of the contemporary Native writers' art is that they do not aim their written stories at imagined individual readers rather write with the conviction of involving the community in the reading/listening activity. Their style or narratology makes sure that they attract the communal sense of the reader, appealing to the audience in the same manner

as the oral or folklore performances do. Inevitably the storytelling, as it happens in the Native American fiction, becomes a dynamic phenomenon characterized by continuity and incorporation as each time the story is read, it is re-written, events are integrated within the events carrying the narrative forward as it happens in the oral tradition where the intersection of the live audience may cause the narrative to shuffle forward and forward in time adding new events to strengthen some details or to highlight some other traits or relations of the character.

According to P. G. [Allen and Selmon, \(1991\)](#), Erdrich, in her oeuvre, and particularly in the *Tracks*, drawing amply upon postmodern assumptions, draws attention to and dismantles the binarism and dualities that Western culture thrives on and exposes those “gaps, absences and silences” which were “produced by the colonial encounter” (p. 410). [Michael Taussig \(1987\)](#) argues that in her texts, “stories and actualities are merged so that holding to a difference/binary between myth and history” (p. 360). Wilson [Harris \(1983\)](#) emphasizes to focus on Erdrich “to perceive realism and fantasy as a threshold into evolution and alchemy. That threshold is a component of the “mental bridge” within and across cultures” (pp. 69, 70)

Textual Analysis as a Methodological Tool

This study prefers to use textual analysis of the selected female-authored Native American text to discuss how Louise [Erdrich \(2001\)](#), an acclaimed mixed-race Native American writer, has used fiction to depict the historical and cultural accounts of her people, colonization of lands and minds they suffered, the subsequent torture and trauma that affected their lives permanently, and after centuries of humiliation and bondage, now writing their own discourses, they have presented before the world the true picture of their misrepresented history, culture, humanity and extensive struggle of their women against numerous forms of oppression and discrimination in predominantly white society

In this study which is literary in nature and falls within the category of cultural criticism, the textual analysis strategy will be employed to explicate the literary representations of the Native women in a magical-realist mode of narration. In this regard, Catherine [Belsey\(2005, p. 157\)](#) spells out the inextricable relation between textual analysis and cultural criticism: “textual analysis is inevitable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural criticism, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts, or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artefacts”. Belsey’s observation regarding the literary artefacts bearing the inscriptions of the culture, when applied to Native American literary texts to observe whether the literary representations are culturally informed or not, confirm that these literary texts are the product of cultural forces and carry the cultural inscriptions. Pat Hudson also reinforces the primacy of textual analysis in the current literary and critical practices, “Literature research and literary criticism, as currently practised, confine themselves almost exclusively to textual analysis, scarcely ever mentioning or using numbers” ([Hudson, 2005, p. 131](#)). Why textual analysis focuses upon elucidating the textual contents and scarcely requires numbers, she further observes, is because “numbers are employed to convey dates, values and amounts, but are little questioned in relation to emphasis, style or content” ([Hudson, 2005, p. 131](#)).

Matrix of Magical-Realist Narrative Strands in *Tracks*

Since Erdrich was alive to the variety of oral traditions the tribal people practised to tell stories of their glorious past, indigenous culture before the act of interaction with the white colonizers, their spiritual affiliation with the lands they once possessed and lived happily on in the company of nature and its creatures whom they believed to be their relations, her fiction, especially her tetralogy of which *Tracks*(2001) is a part, draws on a variety of these narrative techniques with the effect that the narration strongly reminds one of the both oral and written traditions associated with the Western and the Native American people’s storytelling traditions. Erdrich creates the atmosphere of dual storytelling by alternating between the point of view of Nanapush, the Native storyteller and the trickster figure and Pauline Lamartine, the disillusioned Native girl who is caught between the white and the indigenous cultures and vacillates between the two extremes to locate her identity. By simultaneously negotiating the Western and the Native narrative strands and dividing the storytelling between the two characters of opposite genders and ages, she foregrounds two dimensions of the same reality making

the audience/readers see that with the change of perspective, the reality changes. There is no one, all exclusive, monolithic version of reality available that could be said to be universally acceptable because the people belonging to different cultural and racial backgrounds would perceive the reality in the light of their own guiding ideologies. Erdrich, while giving an interview to Deborah Stead, made clear how the idea of using dual narrative voice came from a casual remark once made by her late husband and collaborator, Michael Doris, who told Erdrich about the Athapaskan Indians living around Alaska who does not have first-person pronoun "I" in their language and use instead "we." This suggested Erdrich the idea of using the multiple narrative voices to comment upon the different possible versions of the same event as well as to highlight the collective communal perspective of the Chippewa oral tradition, which she knew so well and desired to carry along with the Euro American written tradition suggesting, on the one hand, the potential and significance of the oral tradition in the postmodern fictional framework and, on the other hand, mixing the two strands to allow the narrative develop into a hybrid form corresponding to the cultural and racial hybridity of the modern times. The device, besides projecting the differing versions of the historical phenomenon which was earlier depicted by the white writers with racial prejudice, enables her to present the spiritual disintegration of the tribal people at the individual and the collective level.

Multiple Voices of the Postmodernist Narratology

Relying upon multiple voices of the postmodernist narratology, employing contrastive and variant stylistic strands, *Tracks* juxtaposes the dynamics of the Western and Native narration and the narrator and questions the monolithic versions of the Native American history: Nanapush, the elderly, at times mischievous and mystic narrator of the past, is sharply contrasted with the mixed-blood Pauline, an intense and zealous convert to Christianity, an insider Anishnaabeg who harbors strong aversion against the Native mores and modes of life and subsequently lives almost hysterical life ferreting for her true identity. The unsettling tension in the polyvalent voices of Nanapush and Pauline, the representatives of the old and new order of the civilization, symbolizes the multivalent conflict between the vanishing tribal cultural life and the encroaching Western religious system. The deep-rooted conflict that pervades all the fields of life sets the two contrasting perceptions of reality moving, constructing and reconstructing reality in dialectical mode. Nanapush and Pauline, the significant characters and narrators who, apart from interacting and influencing the lives of those whom they relate to, comment upon and manipulate the others. By virtue of their taking part in the development of the story, they are extradiegetic and homodiegetic. Nanapush narrates the story to his granddaughter, Lulu, a homodiegetic narratee who frequently figures in other novels and who has received her education at a Christian boarding school where she had been kept deliberately away from her Native heritage. Nanapush relates to her the events of the calamitous past when their tribe was obliterated, leaving only a few to survive, Lulu's heroic and mysterious mother being one of them. He is relating her story so that she should keep in her blood alive the ancestral past and the sacrifices her people gave to preserve the culture, myth and traditions. She listens quietly, for the most part, equating the implied reader in the Western narrative tradition. The purpose of Nanapush's passing on the story of the terrible past to his adopted granddaughter, Lulu, is to make her aware of the significance of her elders' past so that, living in boarding school off the reservation, she should not be cut off from the tribal past under the assimilationist propaganda of the Western colonizers. As an insider-outsider informed observer of the two culture's essence, Nanapush relates the events with credibility and appears to be an authentic narrative voice, credible and convincing. His presentation of the fictional truth is authoritative and absolutely dependable. Much like Lulu, the physically present listener of Nanapush's realistic story, we, the implied readers of the tale, are supposed to take the story as true. Once his credibility as an informed and objective narrator is established, his presentation of the supernatural becomes perfectly believable and is perceived as natural, since he has established the plausibility of his narration through recounting the supernatural in a thoroughly realistic manner, giving no impression of their being supernatural because he perceived and presented them from his own point of view. He renders the supernatural as perfectly natural because from the Native American's point of view, which is grounded in the no-distinction between the supernatural and the natural, these events are not likely to shock the perceiver of this brand of reality which, when viewed

from the non-Native perspective, appears uncanny, unrealistic and incredible. His viewpoint is steeped in the Indian frame of reference, which sees no difference between the magical and the real' natural and the supernatural.

On the other hand, Pauline, though a member of the same community, loses her respect and identity in the eyes of the people because she abandons the indigenous cultural and spiritual values and hence, her storytelling, reflective of the same ambivalence of nature and uncertainty of truth, lacks reliability. Loss of personal and cultural identity as well as the abandonment of the Native religion makes her appear unworthy and highly discreditable figure. Her fascination rather an obsession with Christianity leads her to the gradual abandonment of the Native religion; however, it is interesting to note that she fails in fully assimilating herself into the new religion and remains hanging between the two cultural traditions. Her rejection of the Native culture is seen by others as an act of treachery with one's own cult and makes her a liar in the eyes of the community. Erdrich highlights here the significance of religion and the hold of beliefs on the minds of the community. An individual is respectable in society as long as he or she conforms to the religious beliefs of the community: rebelling against the communal religion will inevitably undermine the credibility of the individual putting sanctions of disbelief upon his/her narrative. Similarly, Pauline's words lose truth and reliability among the community, and she comes to be regarded as a liar. Erdrich recounts the state of distrust: "she was given to improving truth. Because was unnoticeable, homely if it must be said, Pauline schemed to gain attention by telling odd tales that created damage" (p. 39). Whereas Nanapush's narration has a narratee and speaks directly to the audience through continuously shifting first and third-person narratives, corresponding to the personal and the collective voices, Pauline's voice does not have a narratee nor does it particularly address an audience, rather, corresponding to her dual nature, remains ambiguous in its targeting of audience. In an attempt to speak to the community, her voice corresponds to those Indians who preferred to adopt the new culture's ways, breaking relationship with the ancestral culture and thus became gradually imbibed in the dominant culture, gradually distancing themselves from the native ways. With her obsession with the white ways, she, at times, appears mad, and her discourse touches the boundaries of madness, practically throwing into doubt the validity of whatever she claims or says; hence, recounting the magical realist events by her sounds more bizarre, and, hence, unbelievable. These elements make sense more as the discourse of madness, the product of aberration of mind rather than conscious and deliberate synthesis of magical and realist. She presents a contrast to Nanapush in terms of growth of telling of a story and the development of personality: Nanapush, after having received an education in Christianity, grows up as a Christian only to end up in the woods talking to Native American ways, while Pauline, despite growing up in Native traditional setup, becomes obsessed with Christianity and formally becomes a devotee, a nun to achieve spiritual edification promised to those who dedicate their lives to the spread of religion and transforming masses to the emancipatory doctrine of Christianity. However, paradoxically, the more she distances herself from the indigenous ways, from the ancient pagans, the more strongly she feels bound with the local customs and rites, and at times, consciously or unconsciously, she feels irresistibly pulled back to the abandoned roots. The fact that her abandonment of the native vision of life does not let her fully assimilate into the white culture despite her passionate wish and violent attempts at it makes Pauline an interesting case from a marginality point of view: she becomes the signification of marginalized women and hybridized Indians fitting into neither white nor native cultures. Seen from this standpoint, her robust inclination to mysticism and subsequently to fanaticism becomes an outlet for her to escape from the trap of invisibility and insignificance woven around her by her being a woman in the first place and of a mixed-blood in the second place.

Keeping in view the complex and multilayered nature of reality, as the postmodernists would argue, the characters in *Tracks* are made to inhabit differing worlds, go through diverse experiences, and thus, construct their strikingly different versions of the same incident. Confined no more within the constraints of monolithic realities, the hybrid characters in particular and the pure ones less emphatically, construct the reality in ways that differ enormously from their white counterparts, legitimizing the non-White experience and its articulation by the black people whose version of reality, being considered inauthentic and unreliable, had been suppressed for centuries. While the text is constructed of the two antithetical narrative strands reflective of the two contrasting traditions and

incongruous lifestyles, it is obliged to resolve the narrative tension by either privileging the one tradition over the other or harmonizing the both in perfect unity achieving a synthesis of the two. Nanapush and Pauline's narratives, sometimes of the same and at other time of different incidents, create diverse reactions: Nanapush's recounting the events incorporates White and non-White perspectives and achieves their synthesis, while Pauline's narration, being caught and suspended between two worlds, unsettling and confused as it were, fail to evoke definite responses and ends up in the arrested uncertain conclusion.

Interplay of Magical Realist Typologies

In Erdrich's fictional world, which is grounded in the social reality surrounding her people, it is the fusion of real and unreal, natural and supernatural, that foregrounds the Magic realist elements of the lived experiences of the Native people. The artistic synthesis of these elements in her fiction is not incidental; it is rather the result of her conscious and deliberate employment of postmodern techniques compounding Western and Native narrative hues. She makes her intention as to why she chose to write in this specific style clear: "There is no quantifiable reality. Points of view change the reality of the situation, and there is a reality to madness, imagined events, and perhaps something beyond that." (Chavkin, 1993, 1994, p. 224). Her use of magic realism becomes an effective vehicle in subverting the strict Western demarcation of reality, its spatiality and temporality, and the marginalization of women in the country of their own from which they were exiled in the most humiliating manner. Her envisioning of reality as multilayered and relative to the perspective of the perceiver, thus, just does not only challenge the received western knowledge claims and ideologically mediated conceptualization (grossly prejudiced and racial) of the Native people whose cultural practice they abhorred and suppressed but at the same time provide the world with another perspective to look at the reality enlarging their vision of the world.

The implications of the eclectic term Magical Realism are enormous since it has been employed by the practitioners of this genre to achieve a variety of purposes: to synthesize the antithetical perspectives, to juxtapose the divergent world views, or to validate the hitherto invalidated silenced voices of the marginalized people. The articulation of this bizarre phenomenon in written form, as opposed to its occurrence in oral tradition, in a magical realist text, artistically combines the magical and realist, natural and supernatural, terrestrial and extraterrestrial realms. Dissolving the rigid boundaries constructed by the Western epistemologies between the human and non-human, natural and supernatural, realistic and surrealistic worlds, the magical realist text undermines the hierarchical nature of social and anthropological reality in ways that usher in a new order which celebrates the harmonious co-existence of human and the animal, cultural and the natural. Deprivilinging the one binary over the other and bracketing them together, unlike Western-dominated knowledge systems, magical realist text constructs the human characters with consistent references to and in relation with the animals and natural world, implying that the human and the non-human do not exist as exclusively separate entities rather they are inextricably linked.

Conclusion

Though Erdrich's writings easily fall under the magic realist interpretations because of the clearly identifiable use of the magic realist strategies used widely by her, and her many eminent critics draw attention to her successful blending of Western realist and Native magical narrative strands, she refuses to be classed as a magical realist novelist. She, apparently, does so to escape restrictive categorization of the writers and their literature premised upon their geographical, tribal and ethnic affiliations, as if referring these works of literature to be a digression from the standard or normative. Cognizant of the fact that Native American tribes had survived physical and spiritual persecutions as well as deprivation and displacement from the lands which they held as a symbol of tribal pride and power, Erdrich keeps the narrative firmly informed by and within the ambience of native perspective, which she builds parallel to the European conception of reality. Her use of the strategic ploy of magical realism signals continuity of the extensive employment of this structural artifice by the writers across the fourth world and post-colonial communities often belonging to marginalized and hitherto suppressed nations as a means to representing the issues and the concerns which cannot be

adequately addressed in any other mode of expression with such intensity of purpose as they are communicated through magical realism.

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