

Environment and Literary Landscape: An Ecological Criticism of Louise Erdrich's Novel *Tracks*

Sana Tariq

Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: snarijkh@gmail.com

Bahramand Shah

Assistant Professor, Department of Area Study Centre, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

Connecting the environment with societies' cultures through literature has created a new awareness of environmental issues. The current environmental crisis is a product of modern human culture. The thought of using land as a commodity and disregard for environmental ethics has worsened the ecological crisis. The paper focuses issues of environment highlighted in Native American literature. The anthropocentric behavior of Euro-Americans is contrary to Native American idea of biocentrism. For American Indians, land is considered not merely a stage on which the act is played but also as an active participant in the drama with major role to play in the lives of the characters. This article applies Ecocriticism theory on Louise Erdrich's fiction Tracks to generate an ecological criticism of the text. This paper highlights new ways of treating the natural world, putting responsibility on humans to see how their cultures are affecting environment.

Key Words

Anthropocentric
Approach, Biocentrism,
Ecocriticism,
Environmental Ethics

Introduction

This article analyzes the strands of American Indian environmental philosophy present in the text of *Tracks* and its impact on the artistic imagination of the author. The study is carried out using the theoretical framework of ecocriticism proposed by Cheryl Glotfelty. Literary critics have laid down a theoretical module, connecting human world with environment under Ecocriticism theory. The author's thought process is evident in the use of similes, metaphors and images of environment in the novel. The interaction between human and non-human objects of nature is shown throughout the novel in terms of salvation and betrayal and use and abuse of environment. Many Euro-American authors have discussed these issues, but none has reached the excellence of Erdrich in describing environment in a hauntingly beautiful way. Addressing issues of environment is central in American Indian culture; they see everything in the world with an "environmental" lens. Starting from their spiritual beliefs to their ways of living, environment is reflected everywhere in their life. Erdrich's own culture inspired her to depict the social issues of her community attached to environment which compel American Indians to rise for an ecological cause. With this, the novel shares the thought that humans have a reciprocal relationship with their environment and harming nature can destroy the balance of human life too. With the advent of 'civilized' Europeans to America, followed by technological advancement and religious missionaries, there rose a conflict between Indian ways of life and the European life style. As the tensions grew, the dimensions of this conflict spread out to social, economic and religious aspects. The Indians lost control over the territory they had long held but maintained strongly the traditions they had been upholding through ages and which form the fabric of their societies. Louise Erdrich tracks the roots of American Indian cultures through her novels. In her novel *Tracks*, she reveals Indian wisdom implied in human-nature dichotomy through the tradition of storytelling. On one hand, Nanapush is narrating the story to her adopted-granddaughter, Lulu, enlightening her about the past of her tribe; while on the other hand, the author is immortalizing the story by giving it the written form, making the readers aware of Native American values and customs. Such values and beliefs adhered by American Indians made it possible for their culture to sustain the test of time and turmoil. Erdrich's nostalgic narrative takes the reader back in time when people paid reverence to nature and to the time of transition when they started misusing natural resources for human benefit. Inflicting harm to nature became equally harmful for humans, destroying flora and fauna with lumber industry, disrupted ecological equilibrium.

Ecocriticism studies “human-environment interactions” (Buell et al, 2011, p.417) and its representation in literary works. Literary works are product of author’s imagination which is influenced by the place in which he lives. According to Buell, place and its environment are not merely used as a device in literary text rather human history is related to natural history. Only human interest is not important; man’s relationship with nature is reciprocal. Nature is equally important actor in this universe and humans have to be accountable for their actions which can cause natural disasters. Environment is not shown a constant in the text, rather a process affecting human lives. Ecocriticism has included various branches of psychology, sociology, literature and philosophy which connect the human social sphere with science of ecology.

Native Americans hold distinct beliefs about nature and environment and these beliefs surface in their literature time and again. *Tracks* is the piece of literature that explicitly surfaces this *relationship between human beings and the natural world* at multiple levels. Ecocriticism provides a theoretical discourse, negotiating “between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix) and Louise Erdrich shows her characters fully in contact with their physical environment. Erdrich makes this relation very explicit at several points in the novel like Nanapush tells Lulu that he was able to feel the ground tremble when the trees were being cut on a large scale. Erdrich further describes that as a result to such heinous crimes against nature, Nanapush “weakened into an old man as one oak went down” (Erdrich, 1989, p.9). He mourns the loss of land and is of the view that due to “government bait”(Erdrich 4), they failed to notice that the very land they had inhabited and inherited from their ancestors “was snatched from under [them] at every step” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 4). While at other points, this relation is implicit by the use of figurative language and similes of nature.

The literary landscape of the novel builds an environmental imagination. Nature and place play central role in the lives of Erdrich’s characters; the characters like Fleur and Eli develop environment-related thoughts and lifestyle. The description of Eli Kashpaw is evident of it; “he lived too much in the company of trees and winds [...] he was uncomfortable around humans” (Erdrich, 1989, p.40). Since the characters lived so close to nature and in the company of non-human objects, they grew accustomed to sounds and silences of the environment. Not only characters’ attachment with nature is profound, their environmental imagination is intense too. Their “ears picked up everything in the woods, the rustle of birds, the crack of dead spring leaves and twigs” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 58). Upon losing her child, “Fleur heard her vanished child in every breath of wind, every tick of dried leaves, every scratch of blowing snow” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 170). The physical surrounding of the characters makes them nature-like. What happens to their environment leaves an impact on their thoughts and actions. Eli’s relation with his wife becomes ice dead during the snow season. Inhabitants of the town, Argus, rely more on the spirit of nature and the supernatural forces than human world. Nature embodies a living spirit (for them). When the financial circumstances shrink further, they become restless and expect help from supernatural forces. “She was listening through the walls, through the air and snow, down into the earth which was no shelter” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 171) for them now. All the wailing went unanswered as they think Whites responsible for hurting nature with logging industry.

The narrative develops a connection between Native Americans history and their environment. American Indian characters constantly negotiate with their environment. The story negotiates with their past and present and nature is present throughout history. Erdrich reconnects the readers with the Ojibwe past and uses natural landmarks or climatic incidents as reference points to throw light upon the history of tribe. Ojibwe (also called Chippewa and Anishinaabe) tribe has a whole history related to its place. Ojibwe remember their history of living near an ocean and throughout the novel we find the characters obsessed with the Matchimanito Lake. The interaction and dependence of characters on the Lake and its surrounding environment is evident in the text. The imagery seems to have affected with the environment of the place. Pauline writes about Fleur and Eli, “In the morning, before they washed in Matchimanito, they smelled like animals, wild and heady, and sometimes in the dusk their fingers left tracks like snails, glistening and wet” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 72).

Instead of exactly dating back to months or years, the change of seasons and directions hints the life pattern of the tribe. The novel starts with a description of weather and its play in the tragedy of the tribe, “like the snow [they] continued to fall” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 1) until almost the whole clan was wiped out. The description identifies humans as part of natural world. Characters identify themselves with the place. The consistent reference of the reservation setting highlights the significance of the physical world. They were forced to live close on the reservation and the winters brought with it the “bitter punishment” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 2) in form of sickness. Erdrich also hints disease approaching from different directions which have been symbolic in American territory. Novel reveals that after surviving the inflictions from the South, the West and the East, Ojibwe people could barely stand the disease that approached them from the ‘north’. Weathers have a symbolic significance. Death and disease have been looming on these tribes for centuries; sometimes it is the weather and sometimes the living conditions. Due to congested place, the sickness spread out quickly and most among them were taken by death.

According to American Indian belief, this calamity was considered a retribution for their failure to protect the Mother Earth from clearing trees (for lumber business). For American Indians the relationship of man with nature is reciprocal; they consider human beings accountable for environmental changes and responsible of any natural disasters. Indian tribes revere land as "Mother Earth" which according to their belief, has given birth to humans. They have a spiritual connection with land, environment and everything present in their natural surroundings. Earth is personified, alive and powerful, affecting humans with its fury. The description of cutting of trees shows text's environmental orientation: "Another tree, a large one, pitched loud and long, closer to where we stood. The earth jumped and the shudder plucked nerves in the bodies of the men who milled about, whining softly to each other like nervous cattle" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 223). Like Buell, Erdrich also warns about eco-catastrophic possibilities which will be result of harmful human actions toward nature. Ecocriticism also places primary emphasis on maintaining the balance between nature and humans. According to environmentalists any harm to nature will bring disastrous consequences. This further relates it to environmental ethics which repudiates anthropocentric approach which makes humans center of the universe and all objects of nature subservient (to humans).

Indian belief on supernatural elements, their obsession with spirits of the dead (the reference of Great Spirit) show a binding to universal laws and principles forbidding them from doing certain unjust activities. The involvement of supernatural in their daily affairs seems to be the guiding force in their lives. The destruction of whole town, Argus, is attributed to the cruelty that Fleur, the protagonist of the novel had to face at the hands of few men. Since Fleur is shown as embodiment of nature so natural forces avenge the people who harm Fleur. "The odd cloud" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 28) personifying the vengeance upon the people "became a fat snout that nosed along the earth and sniffled, jabbed, picked at things, sucked them up, blew them apart [...] and everything in the Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 28). Through this particular example, the role of environment is established as an important actor; environment works as a process (Buell) in human lives and affects them with its changing patterns and catastrophes. Erdrich associates nature with a powerful being which responds to human actions, instead of staying constant.

Native American land wisdom is explored in the text through metaphors of nature. All material objects are seen in the light of nature. As they say, "Money burns like tinder, flows off like water" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 33). Trees are personified using expressions as 'groaning', and 'whining' and with other human features like extending their branches and stalks as hands and capturing anyone coming near to them. Wind is presented as a healing element; it works on Pauline "like an elixir that put her mindless and at peace" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 155). Such interplay of human and non-human objects of nature is constantly at work in the novel. It demonstrates that in grand cosmic scheme of nature, only human interest is not important; nature is also an equal actor.

Snow, water and lake are present in the novel throughout as motifs that not only help understand the relation of human beings with the environment but also carry the plot forward. Water is considered as a life-giving force but in the novel, this role is subverted. The lake is the place known as wild and destructive. The character of Fleur is shown as an embodiment of nature; she lives in the wild and is deeply connected to nature. It is also talked about Fleur, in the town, that she killed Napoleon by drowning him in the lake. Even Fleur's description shows her part of the surrounding nature, "Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 18). When Fleur tries to drown herself in the lake, the men who jump after her, they face the wrath of nature and meet their tragic end. On the other hand, Fleur is always protected by nature. For instance, three men who had misbehaved with Fleur are frozen to death in the icy storage of the meat house.

Erdrich's use of animal imagery depicts the dependence and importance of animals in the life of Ojibwe people. Having been lived among them for ages, they adopted animals' ways of surviving harsh environmental conditions and of finding food in the wild. The company of animals affected their thought processes as is evident from Nanapush's claim that "I think like animals, have perfect understanding for where they hide and I have tracked a deer back through time, to the place it was born" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 40). This is analogous to author's attempt to trace the history of her tribe and to keep the track of its evolution through nature. Due to draught of edible stuff on reservation, not only humans but the animals were affected too. The habitants shrunk into skeletons as Pauline describes their condition as "stark and bony, like starved cows" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 64). In those conditions, people smelled like animals, behaved and betrayed like snakes. Hunger was the only thing that mattered. "That winter, holes were chopped in Matchimanito and our people fished with no concern for the lake man down there, no thought but food. People stood on ice for hours, waiting, slapping themselves, with nothing to occupy them but their hunger and their children's hunger" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 130). Pauline further continues to use animal imagery during the elopement description. She comments about Napoleon's distraction from her, "like a dog sensing the presence of a tasteless poison in its food" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 73). This imaginary presence of poison in her mind turns into reality as later on she prepares potion of desire from natural ingredients out of jealousy and mixes it in the food of Eli Kashpaw in order to take her revenge.

When the environment, as a whole, faced deterioration due to technological and industrial advancements, animals were also affected by this change. The whites used and misused animals for entertainment purpose e.g. buffalo expedition. Erdrich shows that animals also feel this change too. They “understood what was happening, they were dwindling [...] the beasts that survived grew strange and unusual. They lost their minds. They tried their best to cripple one another, to fall or die. They tried suicide” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 139-140). The same is tried by Fleur who attempts suicide by drowning herself upon seeing the land of pillagers gone to the Turcot (lumbering) Company.

Nanapush tells Lulu that “Land is the only thing that lasts life to life” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 33). Land is seen as the source of relatedness, power and survival in Indian philosophy. Land is their permanent abode and source of livelihood. After losing the land to government, he realizes the “uncertainties of facing the world without land to call home” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 187). Land is symbolic of their identity, their roots. The land has the power to draw them back to their native places and it is manifested through their blood “as if it runs through a vein of earth” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 31). Pauline could never abandon this connection, after leaving for Argus initially she returns home sensing the signs she receives from nature. Similarly, Margaret, the old lady and mother of Eli Kashpaw, “wanted a place right there that she could trust for her old age” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 57). It is the place which holds their lives, culture, identity and their trust.

Nature's spiritual essence is also implied when the interaction between Pauline and the Great Spirit takes place in the novel. Pauline expresses her interaction with the spirit that “the fire glared into my eyes and the heat from his body flooded me” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 201). This interaction enables them to connect themselves with natural phenomenon, which shows oneness of universe, connecting humans with natural and supernatural world. Humans acquire attributes of other supernatural beings. Even natural objects give them supernatural power. The supernatural element has a stronghold in the Native American philosophy of life and it is evident in the text of novel. Characters constantly remain in interaction with non-human elements and with the spirits of their dead ones who dwell in their surroundings. After the death of their clan, Nanapush recalls, “we felt the spirits of the dead so near that [...] their name grew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle of the night” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 6). Their condition even worsens when the water of the drowned “cold and black, airless” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 6) fills them. The name of their dead ones, “bobbed and shifted” (Erdrich 6) within them. They become so heavy with frost that they are unable to move. That's how the grief and grievance of the dead ones turned them into objects prone to “invisible sickness” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 6). Natural elements like earth or air helped them in connecting with their place and the presence of supernatural forces connect them to their ancestors. The text also shows them as part of nature and with each part of the story a mingling of natural phenomenon with human condition is shown. Expressions like “Our hands lay on the table like cloudy blocks” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 6) explicitly describe this connection.

Native American tribes have always lived their past with the presence of these supernatural beings which strengthen their connection with nature. This is part of their mythical belief that the spirits of their dead ancestors return to nature after their death and become part of it. Nanapush beautifully describes it, “I heard the hum of a thousand conversations. Not only the birds and small animals, but the spirits in the western strands had been forced together. The twigs spun independently of wind, vibrating like small voices. I stopped, stood among those trees whose flesh was so much older than ours” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 220). Description of trees and other natural objects is shown part of clan's history. Nanapush meets the ghosts of his ancestors amidst nature. It is the time when he is able to see his dead relatives and friends. He sees his wives, and can touch them, and he holds his daughter. The reader is so carried away by mixing of natural and supernatural that it becomes difficult for him to decide whether it is the real or the reality created by the author. Nanapush relives his past through the tradition of story-telling and negotiation with the past. The story of the tribe also tells about the contact of natives with diseases, technology and industry through Europeans, eventually causing death, destruction and environmental degradation. He shares, when he was with his father, thick snow came and obscured their trail. This hints towards the fact that Nanapush was the last to survive in his tribe and after him the line of his tribe seized. The snow falling here is the snow mentioned in the opening line of the novel that had wiped out whole his family.

Nanapush opens windows to the story of Ojibwe tribe and the exploitation of their land (with lumber industry) in the hands of Europeans. He reminisces and recalls the time when he “was a vine of old grape that twined the timbers and drew them close” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 33). His role as the respectable person of the clan whose decisions were accepted whole heartedly for keeping the clan together, is alluded to the metaphor of vine. Or he “was a branch, coming from Kashpaws, that lived long enough to touch the next tree over, which was Pillagers” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 33). Here he recalls the time when he helped and guided Eli Kashpaw in his attempt to woo and win the heart of Fleur. But with the time, his power declined and the families in conflict refused adherence to his decisions. This is analogous to their failure to protect and hold the land. “It was dusk of an era” (Erdrich, 1989, p. 209) that

symbolizes an era of respect and reverence to the nature. The Turcot Company was swiftly *snatching* the land and mixed-blood people were joining them in their deleterious pursuits.

He dreams of the time when he enjoyed the happy days of his youth among the family members and recalls them in terms of environment. "I stood in a birch forest of tall straight trees; I was one among many in a shelter of strength and beauty" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 127). The beauty recalled here is related to the flora and fauna present around. But it changes in old age when with his recline comes with decline of the tribe; "Suddenly, a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks, all flattened around me in an instant" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 127). This is flashback to the death punishment of 1912, winters which wiped out the whole family except Nanapush. Similarly, the wrath befalls upon the tribe as the forest is cut down by the Europeans. "Lord who had obviously made the whites more shrewd, as they grew in number...while the Indians receded and coughed to death and drank" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 139). They became helpless in the hand of invaders and "were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous who lived in the trees, the bush, or spirits of animals" (Erdrich 139). They were left on their own to face the music of their betrayal of the earth. During famine, the only help that saved them from starving to death was "the government commodities" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 171). They finally accepted their defeat by accepting that help. The back of famine was broke but "there was something lost" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 176) in the process. The thing lost was power both by Nanapush and the Indians. "Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive. As soon you rely on the possession it is gone. Forget that it existed and it returns" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 177).

The land of Pillagers "was not ordinary land to buy and sell. When that family came here, driven from the east, Misshepesu had appeared because of the Old Man's connection" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 175) but this too couldn't save it. Nanapush recalls this painful situation and its consequences with a gloomy heart, "the thin pungent odor stuck to us, lodged in our clothes, and would be with us forever as the odor of both salvation and betrayal" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 176). Since they became part of the process of clearing the land, they would never be able to walk in those woods again. They became the victims of the forces larger than their might. The Lazarres who understood the situation had become the master of land now. The grabbed the land swiftly and soon "no house stayed empty, no land unclaimed" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 184).

The technological intervention in the Native's life style reaches its peak in the last chapter of the novel. The hissing of insects, whispers of leaves was replaced by "shouts of men" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 206) and "faint thump of steel axes" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 206). Nanapush becomes the silent witness to plight of natural environment in the due to nonpayment of taxes. Now he realizes that Damien "was right in that he should have tried to this new way of wielding influence [...] with a pen and a piece of paper" (Erdrich 1989, p. 209). In this way he could have gotten some face saving for himself and for the tribe. The tribesmen adopted new ways to earn bread and butter which involved log peeling etc. Now the nature had stopped talking to them as Nanapush recalls "the silence of the leaves and the long oppression of the weather frightened me" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 221). Birds stopped clicking and whistling, and animals stopped rustling. "No voice muttered in the shadows" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 221). The trees were cut and sold down and "it was the death road of the trees and all that lived in their shadows" (Erdrich, 1989, p. 209).

American Indian societies have kept nature sacred and found man in service to nature. With this belief that the Earth is living and is their protector mother, a sacred relationship is established with earth. These American Indian values are really needed in modern world to save the planet earth. By understanding these values, we can establish a new relationship with our environment, realizing that our actions can either destroy this planet or can save this planet, which is indispensable for our own survival.

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