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Regaining Cultural and Linguistic Status in the American Literary Context

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This paper describes major cultural and linguistic aspects in Louise Erdrich's novel entitled "The Antelope Wife". One of the main issues is the female characters' search for identity. Their spiritual power on the living and the dead and their ways of shaping human destinies as well as their use of words and names constitute the main concerns of the present study. The conclusion drawn after analyzing the Ojibwa culture and language of the novel is that this Native American cultural group is in great danger of fading away.

Key-words: *Ojibwa, culture, language, identity, names*

1. Introduction

Ojibwa people or the Chippewa stand for an Anishinaabe group of the indigenous peoples in North America. They are known as the Turtle Island people. They have spoken the Ojibwa language which is part of the Algonquian family of languages. 'The Chippewa' or 'Ojibwe' refer to the same people. "The Chippewa stand for one of the most populous Native American cultural groups in North America" (Pirnuta and Badulescu 2011, 22).

For the Native Americans, the communion with nature represents the most important aspect of life: "Over the generations, different tribes learned to coordinate their activities with the forces and entities of the natural world, and they produced an amazing knowledge of how the larger world functioned" (Deloria 2006, 125).

As in any culture, the origin of language and literature is closely connected to the ways of an exclusively oral communication: "North American tribal peoples evolved without written languages, as oral cultures living mouth to mouth, age to age, passing on a daily culture" (Baker 1982, 88).

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2. 'The Antelope Wife' - A Native American Novel

Louise Erdrich is a mixed-blood just like most of her characters from the novel entitled *The Antelope Wife*. Her father is German American and her mother is French Ojibwa:

> Some bloods they go together like water – the French Ojibwas: You mix those up and it is all one person. Like me. Others are a little less predictable. You make a person from a German and an Indian, for instance, and you're creating a two-souled warrior always fighting with themselves. I'm nondescript, I think (Erdrich 2002,110).

Erdrich's work is a famous Native American novel highlighting ways of life of Native American families throughout several generations facing ever changing social, financial and cultural patterns. The novel starts with the depiction of the first generation of strong Ojibwa female characters, illustrated by the Antelope Wife and Blue Prairie Woman, moves on towards Rozin as a representative of half Native American half modern American, and concludes with Cecile and Cally as perfectly adapted characters to the new white American ways.

The round female characters are counteracted by flat male figures: Frank and Klaus Shawano as well as Richard Whiteheart Beads, in opposition with the women characters. The male characters do not undergo changes, that is they hardly evolve or adapt to the new living conditions.

One of Erdrich's main issues in the previously mentioned novel is the search for the self. The struggle for identity is highlighted by the way in which the Ojibwa culture with its multifarious customs and traditions is passed from one generation to another. Erdrich is a Native American writer who creates through culture, language and consciousness.

3. Strong Beading Female Characters

Louise Erdrich has portrayed many complex characters in her work *The Antelope Wife*. The whole novel stands for a bridge across Native and non-Native cultures, human and animal worlds, past and present, tradition and modernity. Throughout the novel, they are presented as being either mixed/blended or split and the issue of identity is discussed in terms of being Native American or white American, human or not. The novel stands for a story focused upon three families which are interwoven throughout several generations: the Shawanos, the Whiteheart Beads and the Roys.

Native American women are very strong characters. By means of their powers, they create an intricate pattern of the world: they have great spiritual assets and give life as well. According to Dean J. Franco, "the older women have a long cultural memory of tribal customs and experience with the vast territory of North America" (Franco 2006, 1).

The original Blue Prairie Woman is a strong character. She divides her spirit into two different parts – one part is dedicated to her lost daughter and the other part to her husband. She longs for Matilda, her lost daughter, and is described as being half spirit/antelope, half human standing for a special kind of people:

> The antelope are a curios kind of people. They'll come to check anything that they don't understand. You flick a piece of cloth into the air where you're hiding, a flag. But only every once in a while, not regular. They're curious, they'll stop, they'll notice. Pretty soon they'll investigate (Erdrich 2002, 27).

Blue Prairie Woman's story involves both her deer husband as well as her windigo man. Another major female character of the novel, Cally, tells the tale of the deer husband of Blue Prairie Woman. As a young woman, she used to go into the forest cooking meals:

> She's cooking out there. Wonder what she's making? Wonder if a little child disappeared, we would find it in the cooking pot? Great-Great-Grandmother ate the whole rabbit. Ears too. She wanted to eat her own arm. So Hungry. That's finally what they named her. So Hungry (Erdrich 2002, 56).

Thus, she is renamed So Hungry. The emphasis is laid upon the communion with nature. Her deer husband was probably Matilda's father. It is worth to mention that the animal wives are common in the traditional Ojibwa culture and literature.

Being trapped in a forceful marriage to Klaus Shawano, the Antelope Wife lives an unhappy life in the city refusing to speak or to communicate in any way with people around her. She behaves just like a wild animal enclosed in a narrow human space. In the end of the novel, Klaus finally understands that he owes her liberation, freedom and lets her go:

> Confused, broken inside, shaking her head, she stumbled over the uneven ground. She began her way west, Klaus watched her going (…) Klaus thought that she might turn around but she kept going, kept moving, until she was a white needle, quivering, then a dark fleck on the western band (Erdrich 2002, 229-30).

Rozin struggles to understand her identity. She is Cally's mother and her story can be perceived as a parallel tale to Blue Prairie Woman's. She marries Richard Whiteheart Beads. He has a bad spirit just like the man Blue Prairie Woman marries. But her first love story was that with the deer. Just like Blue Prairie Woman, Rozin lived a love story, a forbidden one, with a deer man. She finds happiness only when she stops worrying about fate and succeeds in accepting the love between her and Frank Shawano.

Beadwork is a well-known Native American art. It is a traditional element found within the framework of the Ojibwa culture. It can be perceived as a metaphor for the relationship between chance and fate. In the opening section of the novel, beadwork keeps the single thread of life:

> Ever since the beginning these twins are sewing. One sews with light and one with dark. The first twin's beads are cut-glass whites and pales, and the other twin's beads are glittering deep red and blue-black indigo. One twin uses an awl made of an otter's sharpened penis bone, the other uses that of a bear. They sew with a single sinew thread, in, out, fast and furious, each trying to set one more bead into the pattern than her sister, each trying to upset the balance of the world (Erdrich 2002, 1).

Throughout the novel, beadwork gives hope to the characters. Thus, the beads play an important part in the novel. They are passed down from one generation to the other through the family line.

At the end of the novel, a very interesting question is asked: Who is beading us?:

> All that followed, all that happened, all is as I have told. Did these occurrences have a paradigm in the settlement of the old scores and pains and betrayals that went back in time? Or are we working out the minor details of a strictly random pattern? Who is beading us? Who is setting flower upon flower and cut-glass vine? Who are you and who am I, the beader or the bit of colored glass sewn onto the fabric of this earth? (Erdrich 2002, 240).

4. Spiritual Background

Each and every Native American cultural group has a spiritual heritage which makes them different from all the other people. In the past, most Native American cultural groups considered themselves as "the people".

> Regarding themselves as unique, they rigorously followed the commands of the spirits as they had experienced them over uncounted generations and recognized that other peoples had the same rights and status as themselves (Deloria 2006, XXIII).

The universe of the Ojibwa culture is rich in all kinds of spirits. The Native American women have the power to communicate with nature being endowed with strong spiritual powers: "The women in my family are the kind to argue with the spirits. Short, tough-minded, sinuous of thought and bold, we daughters of the granddaughters of Blue Prairie Woman are wavy haired and lightened by the Roy blood" (Erdrich 2002, 34).

The major characters in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*, either human or animal, have windigo traits. Thus, several characters can be perceived as embodying the windigo spirit.

The windigo is a spirit which devours everything. It can take multifarious forms in the case of different characters. The windigo can be associated with the male protagonists dominating the female characters. These male characters are sexually driven, obsessive, greedy, hungry. They are possessive and destructive.

Windigos are connected with obsession, especially the sexual one. And probably one of the best examples here might be Blue Prairie Woman and her deer husband, Shawano the younger. It is through sexual obsession that they become one: "in solitude they made love until they became gaunt and hungry, pale windigos with aching eyes, tongues of flame" (Erdrich 2002, 13).

If we consider that twins are born from obsessive sex then many characters, namely four different generations of twins can be perceived as windigos: the first one, Zosie and Mary, the second one, Zosie and Mary, too, the third, Rozin and Aurora, the fourth, Cally and Deanna.

The Ojibwa spiritual universe is also related to a direct connection with the dead. After Deanna's death, her mother keeps bringing coins and food to her grave and imagines her exploring the woods in the company of her sister:

> Rozin chose to bury her daughter in the old tradition underneath a grave house, built with a small shelf at one end where food and tobacco could be placed for her use. Sometimes Rozin goes up to the reservation on weekends, leaves a coin or two, copper, for some still believe that the water man exacts his price at the red stone gates. If so, she thinks, Deanna will have enough to pay her way time and time over (Erdrich 2002, 191).

After Richard's suicide, Rozin hears her dead daughter's voice and enters a trance hoping to establish a close contact with Deanna's spirit. She feverishly cooks a meal for the dead and waits for their spirits to share the meal of wild rice and find eternal peace:

> Broth will slowly cook the onions into the rice. Before she sets the top onto the pot she adds a tiny pinch of white pepper, but more than that Deanna never liked – simple foods, no spices. (…) Eat it, eat it up, now, she thinks vehemently, heartsick, setting another smaller plate for her daughter at the head of the stairs, then go to sleep (Erdrich 2002, 187).

5. The Power of Words

A closer look at the text of *The Antelope Wife* reveals a seemingly simple overt structure and turn of the sentences. In truth, behind this apparent simplicity, an attentive reader will easily discover hidden meanings, often dilemmas and mysteries to be solved. "The healing power of words is inspired by the gods, and yet it is communal, so that the sacred world is again seen as common in the mythic origins of religious thought" (Baker 1982, 101).

The use of Native American words undoubtedly contributes to this interesting dimension of the novel which we could name 'refined simplicity'. These unknown words scattered all through the book are a challenge and, at the same time, a constant questioning as to meaning for the reader who seeks explanations.

The very name of the Ojibwa tribe designates the Algonquian people living along the shores of Lake Superior. The meaning of 'Ojibwa' or the older 'O'chepe'wag' is 'plaited shoes' and refers to the puckered moccasins worn by the Ojibwas. The members of this tribe are also called Chippewa or Anishinaabe, meaning 'original people'.

'Windigo' is a word which occurs time and again in the novel, most often than not taking the shape of a dog. It turns out that 'windigo' is the name of a supernatural being, a powerful monster that has the desire to kill or eat its victim. Even humans can become 'windigos' if they are led by greed or weakness:

> Windigo. Bad spirit of hunger and not just normal hunger but out-of – control hunger. Hunger of impossible devouring. Utter animal devouring. Utter animal hunger that did not care whether you were sober or brave or had your hard-won GED certificate let alone degree. No matter. Just food. Klaus was just food to the windigo. And the windigo laughed (Erdrich 2002, 127).

Some Ojibwa words like 'tikinagun' (cradle), 'nibi' (water), 'anokee' (work hard) can be understood from the context or are explained/ translated by the author. Thus, for instance the word 'tikinagun' is replaced in the text by 'cradle': "A necklace of blue beads hung from the brow guard of the cradle board" (Erdrich 2002, 5).

Also, when Klaus Shawano being drunk asks for 'nibi', Richard Whiteheart Beads gives the English equivalent of the word: "I got no water, Klaus. Go to the drinking fountain" (Erdrich 2002, 94). Likewise, it is not difficult to infer that 'Gew*h*en' means 'Go!' or 'ogitchida" warrior, as the word occurs in the text a few lines further.

Other words have significant meanings as they make the difference in the understanding of the whole. Thus, for example, 'Gakahbekong' is encountered several times in the text, and every time it could be interpreted in a different way. The closest the reader can come to its real meaning is towards the very end of the book, and it might be translated as a vision of the world: "Gakahbekong. That's what she saw. Gakahbekong. The city. Where we are scattered like beads off a necklace and put back together in new patterns, new strings" (Erdrich 2002, 220). A keyword which overarches the whole structure of *The Antelope Wife* is 'Daashkikaa' which appears in the beginning of the text when it is uttered by the Indian woman gratuitously stabbed by Scranton Roy, the very moment when she passes away: "Daashkikaa. Daashkika. A groan of heat and blood" (Erdrich 2002, 4).

However, we do not have a clear representation of the meaning until it is actually explained in the last part of the novel. When Cally keeps hearing in her mind the word and asks her grandmother Zosie about its meaning, we are finally given the key: 'Cracked apart'. It seems that even if they try hard to be happy or even to survive, the Ojibwas are defeated by inimical external factors but also by their own weaknesses and mistakes. This is why most of them are cracked or torn apart.

6. The Imprint of Names

Still more interesting and significant is Louise Erdrich's choice of names in *The Antelope Wife*. Closely linked to the novelist's preoccupation with symbolical names is naming new-born babies in the Ojibwa/ Native American tradition.

> Native Americans seem to believe that words make things happen…The primacy of language interfuses people with their environment: an experience or object or person is inseparable from its name. And names allow us to see, as words image the spirits of things (Baker 1982, 92).

Zosie Roy, Cally's grandmother tells her granddaughter how she came to be called Ozhawashkwamahkodeykway, a name given by the spirits. During the naming

dream Zosie gambles with the Pembina woman and wins the two names which are meant to be those of her twin daughters and granddaughters: Other Side of the Earth and Blue Prairie Woman. This is how they get their Ojibwa names.

As a consequence, their personalities will bear the marks of previous bearers of these names: "Our spirit names, they are like hand-me-downs which have once fit other owners. They still bear the marks and puckers. The shape of the other life" (Erdrich 2002, 217).

Names are crucial to the destiny of those who get them from the spirits but they are also inextricably linked to the blue beads: "The name goes with the beads….. because without the name those beads will kill you" (Erdrich 2002, 217).

When she gives her daughters 'urban' names – Cally and Deanna – Rozina Whiteheart Beads breaks Ojibwa rules and is punished because of her pride: "I named my girls Cally and Deanna. Bad choice. I broke more continuity, and they suffered for it, too. Should have kept the protection. Should have kept the names that gave the protection" (Erdrich 2002, 35). Lacking protection Deanna dies in a terrible accident caused by her suicidal father. Cally herself falls ill and almost loses her life.

The first Blue Prairie Woman of the story possesses the name of many powerful mothers. After losing her baby-girl in a raid she is no longer herself. Her suffering cannot be appeased by anyone and in no way. She is withering away when the elders decide to change this exquisite old name into a new one – Other Side of the Earth - as she is incessantly gazing in the distance, where her daughter has been carried away.

After giving birth to twin daughters she leaves in search for her first born lost child. When they are reunited, the girl wants to know her name, and the dying mother gives her the name: "Blue Prairie Woman's daughter. Other Side of the Earth. Nameless" (Erdrich 2002,19).

Soon she will be given other names: she will be called the Antelope Wife and Sweetheart Calico, too. But these names will be imposed on her after Klaus Shawano kidnaps her and forces her to live his life, makes her his prisoner by tying her wrist to his own by a strip of sweetheart calico. This is also why she loses her identity, only to regain it in the end of the novel when Klaus finally decides to let her go, escape into wilderness, the land of the antelopes where she will become again Other Side of the Earth or Blue Prairie Woman.

Klaus and Frank Shawano as well as Richard Whiteheart Beads have mixed names, partly Ojibwa, partly urban. On the one hand, their names bear the imprints of their Ojibwa ancestors, on the other, the new names will condemn them to hesitate between two worlds: the world in which names mould destinies, and the world where they are anonymous and confused, despite the urban names they carry along.

Klaus sins against Sweetheart Calico by robbing her of her antelope freedom, Richard ruins his life and that of Rozin and Cally by causing his daughter's terrible death. When breaking the rules of the Ojibwa community they become outcasts, drunkards, lost souls.

Klaus ultimately realizes that he has to allow his Antelope Wife to reunite with the wilderness, at the same time bringing about his own annihilation: "What scares me most is this: the simple knowledge that my Sweetheart Calico is another person than me" (Erdrich 2002,155). Richard is tormented by the crime he has committed unknowingly – "Richard was turning himself inside out" (Erdrich 2002, 150) - and when he understands that he has lost his wife too, he commits suicide.

Frank is tormented by the powerful sexual attraction to Rozina and his obsession with the 'Blitzkuchen'. When he discovers that the secret ingredient which makes the 'Blitzkuchen' perfect is fear, he understands that life's mysteries should not be questioned, and he will be redeemed.

Along with the windigo dogs and their stories Erdrich introduces Sorrow and Almost Soup in the plot of the novel. When the dog Sorrow is breastfed and named by Blue Prairie Woman she also decides the dog's destiny.

By sucking sorrowful milk from her broken mistress Sorrow takes a vow of total faithfulness no matter what: "The dog nursed on human milk grew coyote gray and clever, a light-boned, loping bitch who followed Blue Prairie Woman everywhere. Became her second thought" (Erdrich 2002, 15). When Blue Prairie Woman decides to kill Sorrow to feed her starving daughter, the dog is ready for the supreme sacrifice.

The dog Almost Soup closely follows Cally, just as Sorrow formerly accompanied Blue Prairie Woman. The white dog who almost became soup because of the color of her fur is named by the little girl and thus their destinies will be linked: "The dog is bound to the human. Raised alongside the human. With the human. Still, half the time we know better than the human" (Erdrich 2002, 81).

Almost Soup, Bungeenaboop in Ojibwa, has a human voice and speaks about the mission of dogs in the life of Native Americans: they warn off bad spirits and ghosts, they let their bones be buried in bark houses, they always think of humans first, and they even offer themselves as sacrifices. They also know what beading is about: "They are sewing us all into a pattern, into life beneath their hands" (Erdrich 2002, 83).

When Cally falls seriously ill, Almost Soup sees the black dog, death, and is the first to know that she is in great danger. All through her illness she watches her, licks the sick girl's hand hanging over the edge of the bed.

When she is taken to hospital the dog sneaks into the ambulance and waits close by for the moment when she, Almost Soup, will "put her daughter's life inside her again" (Erdrich 2002, 90). When Cally saved the dog's life and named it, their lives and destinies were bound to intermingle: Almost Soup turns into Cally's guardian angel.

7. Conclusions

Interculturality? Tolerance? Solidarity? Not quite. Erdrich's characters feel split between cultures, languages and identities. The crack between white American and Native American cultures, modern American English and Ojibwa language as well as American, German and French Ojibwa cannot possibly be completely bridged over. It is obvious that Native Americans, Ojibwa in particular, if pure blood or mixed, will never feel at home in the enclosed space of the reservations in which they were compelled to survive in spite of the fact that Native Americans were the first inhabitants of the North American continent.

While at first glance we witness the way of living, customs, beliefs, prejudices, rituals and the way of speaking and naming of the Ojibwas in a big country where different nations share the land and a common language, and not only, it is obvious that harmony cannot possibly be reached. Nevertheless, in this book we definitely hear the strong voice of Native Americans, even if it comes from a reservation. The issue of linguistically and culturally centered identity is obviously at the core of the novel. The Native American characters are without any doubt the very focus of Erdrich's story whereas the white American identity highlight is marginal. The novelist is mainly concerned with her characters' evolution/ involution in a white American context, the only real representative – Roy Scranton – concentrating on the 'insight' conflict of the characters.

If within the framework of the contemporary American society the white American is considered to be the dominant figure whereas the Native American is perceived as a marginal element, in Erdrich's work we face an upside-down situation. Thus, the Native American female character turns into the very focus of an intricate pattern.

Louise Erdrich's novel stands proof for this endeavor to regain a deserved status of the people the novelist represents. Native American literature is a strong instrument in the hands of men and women of letters in their fight for equal chances, tolerance and unity.

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