

Self-Identity in Louise Erdrich's 'The Antelope Wife: A Novel' – A Critical Study

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Volume: 7

Issue: 3

Month: June

Year: 2019

ISSN: 2320-2645

Received: 27.04.2019

Accepted: 27.05.2019

Published: 01.06.2019

Citation:

Sridevi, B. "Self-Identity in Louise Erdrich's 'The Antelope Wife: A Novel' – A Critical Study". *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2019, pp. 1-4.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v7i3.434>



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Abstract

Among the different cultures and traditional practices that are followed in and around the world, the Native Americans follow distinct cultural practices among their clans. Among the Native American tribes, the 'Ojibwe' group is a special clan. This particular clan has fought and acquired freedom from the European settlers. 'Ojibwe' ancestors have notable characteristics that are followed by generation after generation. This study analyses the struggle in emphasizing the identity of the 'Ojibwe' tribal people in the novel 'The Antelope Wife'. Through an innovative story-telling method, the novelist tries to create an identity for them and reclaim their cultural identity. The novelist has used literature as a tool for studying about the indigenous past, family ties, tradition and culture in the novel. Moreover, the novelist strongly stresses upon the importance of family in one's life. According to 'Ojibwe' people, an individual's life is constructed or marred if he is stranded from his family. This study focuses on how myth, imagination, ancestral values and heritage are intertwined in establishing 'Ojibwe' culture.

Keywords: Native American tribe, Cultural Identity, Ancestral values, Heritage, Traditional practices, Myth

Louise Erdrich, an eminent Native American Renaissance writer, who belongs to the Anishinaabe / Ojibwe tribe, has written series of novels, fictions and poems that highlights her tribal culture, heritage and oral-tradition.

'Ojibwe' tribal people are known for their importance given to their ancestry, heritage and parentage. The significance that they provide for families is far more prioritized than any other feature followed in their tribe. Through the importance given to families and relationships, the 'Ojibwe' people hold a deep-rooted affection and they nurture the values followed in their culture to the future generations. These people do not hesitate to help and support each other and they live in harmony with their clan members. During rituals, they unite to exhibit their customary practices. Through the exchange of their values and virtues they cultivate the culture, oral tradition and heritage in one another.

The 'Ojibwe' tribe follow patri-lineal inheritance for many decades and generations, where the family is always led by the male. The man in the family becomes the legal heir of the family and if the family does not have a male heir, the property, business and name reaches the man to whom the girl is married or to the son whom she bears. The women are bound to follow and depend on men.

Through these words of Connie A. Jacobs in her work "The Novels of Louise Erdrich – Stories of her people", it is seen that the writers who belong to the respective culture and tradition describe about that particular tribe in their works:

"Native writers write out of tribal traditions, and into them"... "It is a Chippewa tradition, that forms the work" (Jacobs 70)

Through the eminent way of story-telling, the novelist spins a tale (*The Antelope Wife: A Novel*) which revolves around five generations establishing the culture and tradition of 'Ojibwe' people. The novelist entwines cultural practices of the people with magical realism in the novel. The characters of the novel live in Minnesota region, notably which is resided by the 'Ojibwe' tribe themselves. Many customary practices and traditional beliefs are followed in the tribe.

At the beginning of the novel, an U.S. Cavalry soldier Scranton Roy after raiding a village, kills an old woman who has been taking care of a new-born child. The over-whelmed guilt in the soldier drives him towards the baby that is carried behind a dog's back. The novelist portrays Scranton Roy as a father and mother to the baby through the deed of breast-feeding of Roy to the baby.

"She seized him. Inhaled him". (Erdrich 7)

Through this act of an U.S. soldier in taking care of a child as his own the novelist has emphasized the unbiased nature of the White soldier. Scranton Roy names the child after his mother as 'Matilda Roy' and makes her join in a school. Apart from killing the old woman, Scranton's role in the novel is shown to be a kind-hearted person and he is noteworthy because he binds two different cultures together. This mixed culture has been continued till the end of the novel among all the characters in the five generations.

The novelist highlights the 'Ojibwe' culture in many ways. For an illustration, significance is given to the birth of a child. When a child is born, there is a 'namer' who is nominated from the clan. The namer selects a name for the child and associates a dream with the child at the time of his/her birth. The child, after learning his/her vision, captivates themselves in working towards acquiring the dream. The teenager later achieves the dream through their skills and efficiency, which is regarded to be their re-discovery of identity.

Stuart Hall in his work, "Modernity- An Introduction to Modern Societies" has emphasized that an individual's identity constitutes the nation's identity. In the novel, it is related as the identity acquired by an individual helps to build the identity of the tribal community. This is understood from these lines:

"... the word nation refers "both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous –the nation – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging"... National identities represented precisely the result of bringing these two halves of the national equation together-offering both membership of the political nation-state and the identification with the national culture: "to make culture and polity congruent" and to endow "reasonably homogenous cultures, each with its own political roof." (Hall 616)

Through Cally, the prime narrator her dream vision is achieved. Cally's namer is 'Zosie' who has named her as 'Blue Prairie Woman' that means 'a strong, powerful and invincible name that will not vanish'. The novelist shows Cally to be more attached to her ancestral behaviour. Her quest for the search of her identity does not satiate unless she achieves her identity. She associates her name to her grandmother, Zosie, after which she takes effort in finding out her grandmothers and knowing the stories of her great grandmother, Blue Prairie Woman.

The characters in the novel strive for securing their lost identity in the society. Beginning with, Scranton Roy who has adopted and has raised a tribal girl has gained his identity. Matilda, the adopted daughter of Roy, who considers Roy as her only hope of living, discards him seeing her mother. Matilda achieves her identity by staying with her mother till her death and even after the death does not return to Scranton, but moves to live with the herd of antelopes. The Blue Prairie woman has lost her identity when she has lost her child. She struggles hard to divert her attention by being happy with her husband and bearing twin daughters, Zosie and Mary. Later, she discards them, divides herself into two: Blue Prairie Woman and Other Side of the Earth. One part of her stays in the village whereas the other searches for her child (her lost identity). She searches for her daughter, just wanting to know whether she is alive or dead. When the Blue Prairie Woman finds her daughter, she achieves her identity.

Klaus Shawano, the descendent of Scranton Roy, feels his loss of identity in not marrying a beautiful woman. He assumes that by marrying Calico, who resides with the antelopes, he can achieve his identity. But Calico is already married and is a mother of three

daughters. Klaus does not bother about Calico's previous marriage but kidnaps her and keeps her in his custody. This leads her to be silent for the rest of the life. At the end, Klaus realises that his identity is achieved only when he sets free his 'Sweetheart Calico'. This is seen in the following given lines:

"Antelope woman is taboo, a descendant of the mysterious Antelope People. Kidnapping her causes him to lose his job, his money, his sobriety, and his dignity. Only after becoming sober and letting his Antelope wife return to her home is he able to pick up the pieces of his life." (Jacobs 67)

Rozin, the great grand-daughter of the Blue Prairie Woman, thinks that through her unhappy married life with Richard, her identity is lost. In order to gain her identity, she has a love affair with Klaus's brother, Frank who has been suffering with cancer. After the critical death of one of her twin daughter, Deanna, she realises that in helping and guiding her other daughter, Cally in a righteous path will lead her to achieve her own identity.

Cally, the daughter of Rozin and Richard and the great grand-daughter of Matilda, develops an attraction towards her uncle Klaus's wife, Sweetheart Calico. She believes that there is a deep-rooted culture, tradition and ancestry imbibed in Sweetheart Calico. She has always wanted to communicate with Calico regarding the 'Ojibwe' culture, but her silence affects Cally. When finally Calico speaks up to let her go, it is noticed that she carries the blue beads in her mouth. It is handed over to Cally.

The blue beads also symbolises the 'Ojibwe' culture and ancestry. Initially, the blue beads have been kept in the cradle of Matilda, at the time of her birth, which is later worn around her neck. With the help of the blue beads, the Blue Prairie woman identifies Matilda as her daughter. Since Matilda joins with the herd of the antelopes, it has been transferred to her grand-daughter Sweetheart Calico. Calico stores the beads in her mouth which symbolises an act of preserving her culture and ancestry.

Once the beads are handed over to Cally, she takes effort in finding out her ancestors and the place where she belongs. Cally shows more interest in discovering her ancestral behaviour, 'Ojibwe' culture, tradition and customary practices. It is evident, when Cally, Rozin and Cally's aunt Cecille

converse with each other :

"We developed as a people over many thousands of years. Our culture. Our ways. Our adaptations... And now we're the products of two cultures. Something happened in our family that cannot be explained by the culture we live in now. When our mothers tell the stories they heard from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, we listen and nod as if we think the stories are true... We think the stories are powerful, may be, but metaphorical, merely." (Erdrich 216-217)

The novelist brings in magical realism and imagination in the novel to provoke the readers' anxiety in reading the mixed – cultured elements. It is evident that from the acts of dog carrying a baby on its back and when Matilda's mother who breast-feeds a new-born pup without able to breast-feed her baby, the magical realism in the novel is made to be believed. The 'Ojibwe' tribal people consider all living beings to be equal and do not consider anything to be their sub-ordinates. Dogs have an important role in the novel. The dog that is fed by the Blue Prairie Woman is shown to be emotionally involved with her in all situations.

There is an instance where Blue Prairie woman searches for her lost daughter in the West. The dog never fails to accompany her and even sleeps at the doorstep when she in the house. Even after the rescue of Matilda, the dog does not depart the Blue Prairie woman and it stays with her till its death. In addition to dogs, deer and antelopes also play a considerable part in the novel. Deer who are the ancestors of the old woman has informed about the raid that is to be laid upon their village and it has led to the cautious deed of the old woman in saving the baby.

Similar to the dog and deer, the antelopes have also played an important role in the novel. Carrying the title behind itself, it is seen that Matilda, joins to live with a herd of antelopes once her mother dies of 'mottled skin sickness'. Calico who is the descendent of Blue Prairie Woman and Matilda also lives with antelopes but is later abducted by Klaus Shawona (a distant descendant of Scranton Roy).

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, it is analysed that, a family constitutes a man's values and helps the individual

members to foster the tribal culture and heritage. The family and community join hands in building the people to lead a life that helps them to achieve their own identity. The search for a person's identity and the process of regaining the same and reviving the 'Ojibwe' culture is revealed through the novel.

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