



FREEDOM IN GENDER CATEGORIES IN *TRACKS* BY LOUISE ERDRICH

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Abstract

The article explores the problem of gender representation in the novel *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich. The topic is revealed through the gendering of the Anishinaabe people. The research focuses on the correlation of inner and outer gender roles in the text of the novel. The idea of some gender boundary is marked by various relations in the everyday activities of a man and a woman. The writer marks those gender roles even at the level of the language as some erotic boundary between body and language.

In the history of the two characters, Nanapush and Pauline, one can observe overcoming gender boundaries at both material and spiritual levels. Mother's space that is metaphorically called upon by Nanapush, is simultaneously absent and present, that is a healing space, a revival of Lulu, for whom the novel *Tracks* was written. The words spoken by him and the sounds he articulated preserve some hidden gender aspect. Nanapush generalizes the Anishinaabe gender but not recreates it as a model. That interpretation envisages presupposed knowledge and mastering expressing it. Nanapush's narrative includes a process of revising gender self-representation that at the same time opposes mainstream representation while Pauline presents the 'white' point of view on gender roles of the Native Americans.

In the text by Erdrich, the ability to overcome gender boundaries exists alongside with the acceptance of the fact that in order to preserve the Anishinaabe culture certain gender roles may be needed. The bicultural experience that the *Tracks* characters have to accumulate is used by the writer as the concept of the gender boundary between the two worlds. In the text by Erdrich, gender oppositions dissolve and differences are more clearly revealed through using metaphors.

Key words: Native Americans, gender representation, Indians, Indian literature, sacredness.

The philosophy of life, which restored the rights of the “earthly subject” and introduced the antimony of “life” and “culture and society” as a repressive principle related to the first component, played an extremely important role in actualizing the issue of identity. In this way, the contrast between the “physicality”, “naturalness” of a person and the “artificiality” of the identities imposed on them was posed. Being personal, in this way, was “split” from the middle, there were problems of self-perception and finding one's own place in the environment. In the interpretation of *Tracks* by Erdrich, the power of the Anishinaabe is their connection to Manitou-the invisible, and therein lies their spiritual efficacy. The power of this people received from the spiritual forces never fades: tracked, persecuted, worn out or banished here, it will always appear again, to reappear where it is least expected. The gendering of the Anishinaabe people is an important part of this natural power.

The impact of colonization on the formation of reservations for the native population of the United States caused a collapse in the lives of many indigenous people. Louise Erdrich's novels tell about the consequences of colonial influence on representatives of the Anishinaabe people, the native nation to the writer.

The relevance of our article is determined by the fact that Louise Erdrich's work provides an opportunity to comprehend the multiplicity of gender changes in American consciousness in the 20th century. The writer devised ways to preserve the gender attitudes of the indigenous society at the crossroads of the worldviews of two radically different worlds. Erdrich's *Tracks* provides an opportunity to predict the development of mainstream US society as a whole through the search for gendered anti-colonial values.

The purpose of the study is to give definition to the issues of main gender features identify. Our research is devoted to highlighting the gender problem of Anishinaabe national identity in the texts by L. Erdrich, which becomes especially relevant under the pressure of the colonial mainstream center of the USA in the 20th century. Jane Gallop writes that “the problem of dealing with differences without creating opposition

can only be the essence of feminism” (Gallop, 1982, p. 93). In her novel *Tracks*, Louise Erdrich writes about the bicultural experience of members of the Anishinaabe community living in Little No Horse. The writer uses the concept of the gender border both as a metaphor and as a technique in such a way that oppositions dissolve and differences are revealed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, discussing the feminine aesthetic (an aesthetic superimposed on the postmodern), calls “the vision of both and, generated by changes, opposites, denials, contradictions. The vision of both and, which encompasses the movement, is situational” (DuPlessis, 1990, p. 6). Gender boundaries in Erdrich's novels become the ground that marks the peculiarities of the national identity of the Anishinaabe people.

Nancy J. Peterson examines the gendered behavior of Erdrich's characters through a revision of historical discourses. The new historicity that *Tracks* inscribes is neither a simple return to historical realism nor a passive acceptance of postmodern historical fiction. The novel poses a crucial question of the referentiality of the historical narrative in the postmodern era; it creates an opportunity for the emergence of a new Indian historicity (Peterson, 1994, p. 991).

Fleur Pilager should be considered as the central character of *Tracks*, near the end of the novel it will be said about her that she walks without leaving the tracks (Erdrich, 1988, p. 215), this maxim predicts her disappearance for a while from the space of the tribe and together with the disappearance of genuine Anishinaabe, whose gender mentality she personifies. The Morrisseys and Lazars, a mixed-blood family looking to sell reservation land to a logging company, initiate this story of Fleur leaving no traces. It is Morrissey and Lazarus who find Napoleon, whom Pauline strangled in the forest, but they blame Fleur for this murder. Although the metaphor of Fleur being able to walk without tracks rather suggests pessimism about the future fate of the preservation of Anishinaabe gender culture, the narrative that conveys the image of tracklessness undoes it. Fleur's ability to move invisibly gives her the magical power of Manitou, worthy of being told about in the history of *Tracks*, which Erdrich would go on to do in the prolific novels of *Four Souls*, *Bingo Palace*, and *The Painted Drum*.

Nanapush reconstructs his past with Fleur: “Because I saved her from illness, I was connected to her. Not that I knew that to begin with. Only looking back, I see a regularity” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 33). He stalks the unseen past in search of an important story that will fuel Lula, whom he also saved, and the future of the Anishinaabe people. “There was so much that we saw and never knew”, he says at the beginning of his story (Erdrich, 1988, p. 134). Fleur`s story is an Anishinaabe way of self-discovery.

Nanapush`s ability to deal with the external and internal worlds is evident in his negotiation of cultural boundaries, but interestingly conveyed through metaphors of pregnancy. He tells Lulu how he saved her legs and life from severe frostbite (Erdrich, 1988, p. 167). His language creates an umbilical cord that is supposed to tie Lula back to her native land, from which she was torn as a result of her stay at a boarding school for Indian children. Nanapush uses the words of the native language, but goes beyond that language and meaning. Thanks to the archaic formulas of the language, he resorts to the technique of visualization, which has long been known to his people. Nanapush enters the space of the Other, evokes a representation of the other person's world, but this world is also beyond representation. Entering the space of the Other means, at least metaphorically, entering the space of the mother. In his own speech, Nanapush forms a special mental space, reflecting in it special psychodynamic constructions that will contribute to the restoration of a real connection with his native space. Due to this “motherly” speech of Nanapush, stable mental structures are formed in Lulu, which, under the conditions of the adolescent's cognitive contact with the Indian reality, ensure the arrival of information about the archetypal components of her family and the history of her native tribe.

According to Alice Jardine, besides the Father, that overflows the dialectic of representation, the Other is unrepresentable and will be gendered as female (Jardine, 1985, p. 138). That is, in the male-defined world, the feminine Other originates from representations of the Mother and exists before the appearance of language, so it is beyond representation. This feminine Other inspires the man to represent. Similarly, imperial power codes colonized peoples as feminine, as something that is both

monstrously Other and unknowable, something that can be dominated and redefined by imperial principle.

Another instance of Nanapush's appeal to the hidden femininity in his own personality comes when he describes the cure he is trying to administer to Fleur, who appears to be losing her battle with the United States government, which seeks to take her land. Nanapush learned the method of performing the treatment in a dream: "The person who visited my dream told me what plant to put so that I could dip my hands into the boiling kettle, pull the meat from the bottom or reach into the body itself and eliminate, as I did so long ago with Moses, the name that burned, the disease" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 188). Here, again, Nanapush evokes a mystical experience that exists beyond the realm of language. With the ability to violate the boundaries of the body, it causes the crossing of the boundary between self and other. His words draw attention to the reader's position outside Nanapush's own knowledge and experience. The protagonist strengthens this exclusion by naming one of the plants that helped him not to destroy his own hands, but at the same time adds. As he addresses his granddaughter Lulu, his words emphasize his own cultural beliefs and experiences, to which Lulu is both an insider and an outsider. She is already part of a generation that was distant from the traditions that Nanapush lived by. And that's why Lulu listens so carefully to stories about the times she will never know (Erdrich, 1988, p. 2).

The femininity of the Anishinaabe people is represented by the image of Fleur Pillager. Both Nanapush and Pauline, her antagonist, focus on Fleur's femininity. She herself does not tell her story. Pauline admits that Fleur is the spirit guide of the Anishinaabe. She was the one who closed the door or opened it between the people and the golden-eyed creature in the lake, a spirit that they said was neither good nor bad, but just had an appetite, Fleur was a loop (Erdrich, 1988, c.139). Pauline calls it a "door to the darkness" (Erdrich, 1988, p. 200). Fleur is an intermediary between the material and spiritual worlds. It is known that Fleur belongs to the Bear clan, about which her compatriot at the end of the 20th century, the poet Gwendolyn Benaway, wrote: "I belong to the Bear clan, representatives of this clan should be the keepers and guardians of our communities. We are fearless in love, brave, rebellious, stubborn, ready to raise the alarm at the first sign of danger. We are provocateurs both within and outside of other societies. We are always ready to challenge those in power and stand up to

injustice. We are well versed in herbs and earth magic. We can heal ourselves” (Benaway, 2017, p. 114).

Paradoxically, Pauline tries to imitate Fleur even as she wants to bring her down. In this way, her attempts at self-representation are on the very front of self-denial. We see Fleur throughout the novel, both in Nanapush's narrative and in Pauline's stories, trying to make herself visible to whites at all costs, even by spreading false information or simply lying, as Nanapush puts it. Unlike Nanapush's language, her narrative has no markers of oral tradition. Erdrich draws the reader's attention to Pauline's language through which she tries to approach the white mainstream. She demonstrates her faith in language when Christ, who regularly appears to her in the convent kitchen, tells her that she is completely white. However, Pauline discovers this by moving to a white worldview from an Indian one (Erdrich, 1988, p. 138), she rejects even the very language of her people.

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