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NARRATIVE WEAVING OF NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES IN "THE ANTELOPE WIFE"

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Abstract: *The present paper analyzes the multifarious narrative techniques depicting essential aspects of the impossible reconciliation between two separate worlds represented by multiple voices: on the one hand, the strong traditional Native American thread and on the other hand, the weaker and weaker "civilized" Minneapolis' statement of the 1990s. Erdrich's contrast between the well-defined and pale utterances manages to bring into focus the tremendously rich heritage of the Native American civilization as it is presented in "The Antelope Wife". The diverse narrative structures constantly interweave, thus creating a complex vista of the contemporary American society.*

Keywords: *Native Americans, narrative techniques, multiple voices, heritage, civilization, weaving.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Karen Louise Erdrich is a famous Native American writer belonging to the second wave of the Native American Renaissance. She was born in Little Falls, Minnesota and grew up in a family of storytellers in Wahpeton, a small town in North Dakota.

Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* can be considered a mixture of independent tales told in her own way thus shaping an intricate narrative design.

Her fiction consists of patterned designs highlighted by motifs and themes derived not only from the Ojibwa culture inherited from her mother and grandfather who was a tribal chief belonging to the Turtle Mountain Band as well as a fine storyteller and beader, but also from her father who was of German origin and whose parents owned a butcher shop which turns into a bakery shop in *the Antelope Wife*.

The Antelope Wife is a hybrid piece of work in which Louise Erdrich blends poetry with short story fragments. The multiple tales stand for narrative threads which are interwoven by the multiple characters.

Erdrich's main technique is that of weaving stories together using multiple narrators within the framework of a mythic landscape. Her characters, be they strong female ones or pale male representations, are part of the landscape presented in her novel.

The same technique is used by William Faulkner in his Yoknapatawpha novels. The multiple tales are not necessarily presented in a chronological order.

Louise Erdrich uses a wide range of narrative techniques: multiple narrative points of view, multiple tales, the strategy of weaving stories together as well as multiple narrators.

Erdrich's storytelling includes poetic rhythms as well as sensible images as poetry aims at connecting the written text to the oral

2. NARRATIVE WEAVING

tribal tradition, thus her readers turn into a kind of listeners.

The metaphor is highly used in Erdrich's fiction and the best examples might be the metaphors of beading and sewing, different tinges of color being blended, such colorful patterns being dyed on the Ojibwa quills.

The novel is divided into four different parts, each part starting with the same recurrent motif.

Part One, entitled *Bayzhig*, starts as follows: '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. (...) 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). Thus, women decide the most important things in life weaving the pattern of their existence.

Part Two, entitled *Neej*, starts with the same motif: 'THE PATTERN GLITTERS WITH CRUELTY. The blue beads are colored with fish blood, the reds with powdered heart. The beads collect in borders of mercy. The yellows are dyed with the ocher of silence. (...) The design grows, the overlay deepens. The beaders have no other order at the heart of their being. Do you know that the beads are sewn onto the fabric of the earth with endless strands of human muscle, human sinew, human hair?' (Erdrich, 2002:73). As we can see from the previously presented quote, the narrators address directly the readers turning them into the listeners of the tale, thus they are 'you', the style being colloquial.

Part Three, *Niswey*, has the following opening quote: 'SOUNDING FEATHER, GREAT GRANDMA of first Shawano, dyed her quills blue and green in a mixture of her own piss boiled with shavings of copper. No dye came out the same way twice. (...) The final color resulted from what she ate, drank, what she did for sex, and what she said to her mother or her child the day before' (Erdrich, 2002: 99). The numberless color nuances on the Ojibwa quills represent the multicolored

patterns of the Native American culture and existence.

Part Four, *Neewin*, starts with the same metaphor of beading: 'THE RED BEADS WERE HARD to get and expensive, because their clear cranberry depth was attained only by the addition, to the liquid glass, of twenty-four-carat gold. Because she had to have them in the center of her design, the second twin gambled, lost, grew desperate, bet everything. At last, even the blankets of her children' (Erdrich, 2002:183).

As we have previously mentioned, each part starts with a short introduction acting as connector, thus giving access to the tales told in that particular part.

Erdrich's novel includes interesting aspects from both the Native American tribal storytelling and the Western forms including German influences.

In *The Antelope Wife*, Erdrich uses an Anishinaabe worldview and an Ojibwa word, which turns into a recurrent motif: that is, *daashkikaa* meaning 'splitting apart' or 'cracked apart', a split between cultures, identities as well as languages.

Each part bears dual titles: the English version -*Part One, Part Two, Part Three, Part Four* and the Ojibwa variant - *Bayzhig, Neej, Niswey, Neewin* meaning one, two, three, four in the Ojibwa language. Thus, there is a split and a mixture of languages and cultures.

The Ojibwa word *daashkikaa* refers to two different worlds which are fused in the present narrative pattern: the strong traditional Native American thread and the weaker and weaker 'civilized Minneapolis' statement of the 1990s.

3. NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES

Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* is representative for the Native American culture and literature. The author creates a fictional realm inhabited by multiple narrators whose voices are interwoven in a very sophisticated pattern.

In her fictional world, by means of her multiple narrators, Erdrich creates a community within which multiple life experiences are interconnected. The narrative voices address directly the audience, the style



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being informal. Her characters tell stories, sew, cook and their names bear certain significances.

Several narrative threads are interwoven around the Roys, the Whiteheart Beads and the Shawanos throughout several generations in between the 1880s and the 1990s.

Among the narrators, there are both human and non-human voices, each contributing to the pattern of the Native American existence.

For instance, Klaus Shawano when explaining why he is 'no longer friends with Whiteheart Beads' is weaving part of the Native American design in the novel. The whole chapter four which belongs to Part One is a monologue, Klaus asking and answering his own questions. 'Richard Whiteheart Beads, I've thought so often, foe or friend? I decided on the first because he cost me everything I had. I did manage to keep my life, but aside from that – my clothes, my savings, my house, my boat, and even, yes, my wife, Sweetheart Calico. My Antelope Girl. Gone. Due to Whiteheart' (Erdrich, 2002:43). Along eight pages, he recalls bits of conversation with Richard, Rozin's husband, and analyzes their relationship in minute details. The whole chapter is structured like very many other fragments of the novel resembling a diary entry.

In subchapter 13, entitled *The Blitzkuchen*, belonging to Part Three, the same narrator, Klaus Shawano, tells a story. This time the tale is retold being an objective one. The events narrated are filtered through his life experience. It is as if he recalls happenings before his own birth. 'From inside the kitchen, then, where Frank had stubbornly placed himself and from where Regina, heavy as the stove herself, refused to move, they got as much of the story as they could, or maybe as I was ever supposed to know' (Erdrich,

2002:135). And thus the story of the Blitzkuchen is retold just as the re-baking of the Blitzkuchen by Frank Shawano, his brother, will be a climax in the later development of the novel.

Frank strives all his life to achieve the Blitzkuchen he had once tasted in an ecstatic moment. 'They breathed together. They thought like one person. They had for a long unbending moment the same heartbeat, same blood in their veins, the same taste in their mouth' (Erdrich, 2002:139), but he fails in his endeavor and is deeply disappointed.

In opposition to the previous weak voice of Klaus, Cally's strong voice is echoed several times throughout the second half of the novel.

Cally is Rozin and Richard Whiteheart Beads's daughter. Tormented by the past and especially by the death of her twin sister, she tells a tale of the past at the same time trying to guess what the future would be like for her mother and former lover, Frank 'Mama is uncomfortable, even standoffish with Frank Shawano. Or it could be that she is locked up in the past. She figures that she is done with, finished, all over with love and those complications. No more. A relief. I understand her and that makes sense. But here is Frank, so kind, his hands plucking cotton candy off a paper cone to hand first to her, then me. And so unassuming' (Erdrich, 2002:144).

Although still very young, she is a very experienced observer of the people who surround her: her mother, Frank, Cecille – Frank's sister, her grandmothers, Mary and Zosie: 'For instance, Mary and Zosie, the two powerful twins, have the complex history of having loved the same vanished man' (Erdrich, 2002:197). Interestingly enough, she succeeds in being both subjectively and objectively involved in the 'colliding histories

and destinies. Loss, darkness', this being the only universe she knows.

Another interesting voice, this time a non-human one, is that of Almost Soup, an 'extra clever' dog stating the following: 'I survived into my old age through dog magic. That's right. You see me, you see the result of dog wit. Dog skill' (Erdrich, 2002:75).

Almost Soup tells the amazing story of dog survival. According to a Native American custom white puppies born on a reservation were destined to give substance to soup. This dog knows how to escape his fate by doing everything humans want to see: 'I throw puppy love right at her in loopy yo=yos, puppy drool, joy, and big-pawed puppy clabber, ear perks, eye contact, most of all the potent weapon of all puppies, the head cock and puppy grin' (Erdrich, 2002:78).

The consciousness of a dog proves to be more experienced and wiser than that of a human. Like most of the main characters, Almost Soup is a looker on, an attentive perceiver of important details and even gives advice to puppies like himself but also humans surrounding him: 'Avoid all humans when they get into a feasting mood' (2002:79); 'I tell you, when a man goes out drunk in his motorboat, hide.' (2002:80); 'Humans call that fate. We dogs call that stupidity' (2002:80).

The story very nicely told by Almost Soup is the story of love and reliability between a master and his dog: 'my friends and relatives, we have walked down the prayer road clearing the way for humans since before time started. We have gone ahead of them to present their good points to the gatekeeper at that soft pasture where they eat all day and gamble the night away. (..) The dog is bound to be human. Raised alongside the human. With the human. Still, half the time we know better than the human' (Erdrich, 20002:81).

Therefore, these are only three of the narrative voices heard in the novel, but there are several other utterances who take part in the creating of the network of strings and beads some of which are strong voices, others being only weakly perceived.

There is also a unifying utterance, that of an objective anonymous narrator who seems to

pull all the strings together. This is how the pieces fall into their places and the pattern is masterfully completed.

Here is the ending quote of *The Antelope Wife*: '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? (...) We stand on tiptoe, trying to see over the edge, and only catch a glimpse of the next bead on the string, and the woman's hand moving, one day, the next, and the needle flashing over the horizon' (Erdrich, 2002: 240).

The Antelope Wife is a novel which teaches us, the readers, a lesson: the lesson of humility. Are we in the hands of someone stronger than us or is it possible for us to forge our own destiny? The answer is maybe that we have the power to change the course of our lives if we act positively at crucial moments, like Almost Soup did when on the verge of losing his life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Louise Erdrich's novel can be considered a tapestry of culture and myth, a very sophisticated tale of family with a very complicated pattern consisting of the interwoven lives of the family members.

Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife* can be considered a re-dimensioning of the Native American voices, a re-birth of the Native American culture.

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