



The Images of Women as Encoded in Native American Literary Texts: A Feminist Analysis of Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love* and *The Antelope Wife*

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Abstract: Literature functions as a means of social commentary, effectively encapsulating the prevailing concerns of the time period in which it was produced. Native American literature represents the diverse experiences of indigenous individuals and serves as a reflection of their cultural heritage and traditions. Louise Erdrich is a highly acclaimed and widely recognized Native American female novelist whose fiction garnered significant attention from feminist literary critics due to the prominent role of women and their narratives in her work. These critics have examined her portrayal of strong and resilient female characters, the depiction of her fictional world as a community, and the exploration of various themes relevant to women's experiences. Feminism is derived from the French term "féminisme" and refers to a socio-political and economic movement that seeks to achieve gender equality by advocating for women's rights and legal protections. The history of this movement might be categorized into three distinct waves. The initial feminist movement emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed by a second wave in the 1960s and 1970s. The third wave of feminism began in the 1990s and continues to the present day. Feminist theory originated from the aforementioned feminist movements. This paper employs feminist literary criticism to analyze Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love* (1996) and *The Antelope Wife* (1998). These novels explore themes such as women's work, love, sexuality, and their ability to challenge traditional masculine authority.

Keywords: Native American literature, Louise Erdrich, Feminism, *Tales of Burning Love*, *The Antelope Wife*.

“For most of History; Anonymous was a woman”

(Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)

1. Native American Literature :

Native American Literature comprises works authored by and centered on indigenous people. The tradition of storytelling originated more than thirty thousand years ago, when indigenous communities first began recounting tales of emergence, creation, voyage, quest, valor, survival, and deceit. The evolution of this practice may be traced from its ancient duty of inducing rainfall and promoting physical well-being, to its subsequent aim of resisting European invasion and colonialism and finally to its present position as a global literary tradition that challenges dominance while honoring the creativity and tenacity of indigenous cultures.

Literature plays a significant role in illustrating the societal depiction of women. Native American literature portrays the voices and lived realities of indigenous women. Prior to European conquest, tribal women held a revered position as the creators and custodians of culture and tradition. They were on the same level with indigenous males. However, with colonialism, the condition of indigenous women deteriorated. They were compelled to rely on men for economic support. Their responsibilities were limited to housekeeping and child-rearing. Consequently, their social standing diminished, rendering them susceptible to the influence and manipulations of men. American Indian writers have



effectively highlighted the burdens and patterns of violence that contribute to native women and children's vulnerability to state regulatory power and extrajudicial brutality. Since the 18th century, Indigenous women have utilized the English language to create written works that reflect and reinforce Indigenous legal concepts and social structures, while also contesting the influence of settler colonial law. Louise Erdrich is a significant modern Native American author who focuses on matters of identity, gender, and land. Leslie Marmon Silko and other authors criticized her writing as being ostensibly postmodernist, while a more precise identification would be with the literary style of French feminists like Hélène Cixous.

2. Ecofeminist Literary Criticism :

As per the Cambridge online dictionary, feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state." Feminism refers to a political, cultural, or economical movement that seeks to achieve equal entitlements for both men and women. However, the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' did not achieve popular significance until the 1970s, when they began to be more commonly employed in public discourse. Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker propose that the history of feminism can be categorized into three distinct waves.

First wave feminism denotes a prolonged period of feminist activism that took place in the United Kingdom and the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, the movement aimed to advocate for gender equality in terms of contractual and property rights for women. It also sought to challenge the institution of chattel marriage and the practice of husbands having ownership over their wives and children. In the late nineteenth century, activism shifted its focus towards attaining political power, with a particular emphasis on securing women's suffrage. Florence Nightingale introduced female nurses as supplementary personnel to the military in 1854. In the United Kingdom, both the Suffragettes and the Suffragists advocated for women's suffrage, with the latter group potentially achieving greater success. The Representation of the People Act 1918, enacted in 1918, extended voting rights to women who were over the age of 30 and owned property. In 1928, the suffrage was expanded to include all women aged twenty-one and above. In the United States, first-wave feminism included a diverse group of women who mainly campaigned for the eradication of slavery before later advocating for women's suffrage. Certain individuals were affiliated with conservative Christian organizations like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, while others aligned themselves with more radical factions such as the National Woman Suffrage Association or acted independently. The first wave of American feminism is commonly regarded as concluding with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1919, which granted women the right to vote nationwide. The term "first wave" was coined in hindsight, following the emergence of the term "second-wave feminism" to describe a more recent feminist movement that addressed not only political, but also social and cultural inequalities.

Second-wave feminism encompasses the period from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. Imelda Whelehan argues that the second wave of feminism can be seen as an extension of the earlier suffragette movement in the United Kingdom and the United States. Second-wave feminism has persisted and currently coexists with third-wave feminism. The first wave of feminism primarily centered on suffrage rights, while the second wave was predominantly focused on broader equality concerns, including the eradication of discrimination. Second-wave feminists recognized the interconnectedness of women's cultural and political inequalities. They urged women to perceive their own lives to be heavily politicized, reflecting the presence of sexist power structures.

The emergence of third-wave feminism in the early 1990s was a direct response to perceived shortcomings of the second wave, as well as a reaction to the opposition faced by its initiatives and movements. It aims to critique or subvert the essentialist conceptualizations of femininity put out by the second wave, which, in their view, excessively prioritize the perspectives of affluent white women in the middle class. Third-wave feminists frequently over-emphasize "micro-politics" and question the second wave's paradigm regarding what is beneficial or detrimental to women. The inception of the third wave can be traced back to the mid-1980s. Feminist leaders from the second wave aimed to establish a place within feminist ideology to address issues relating to race and personal experiences.

Post-feminism covers a variety of perspectives that respond to feminism. Post-feminists, although not explicitly opposing feminism, maintain that women have already accomplished the objectives of the second wave of feminism, while expressing reservations about the goals of the third wave feminist movement. The phrase was initially coined in



the 1980s to denote a reactionary response to second-wave feminism. Now, it embraces a variety of theories that adopt critical perspectives towards earlier feminist discourses, including critiques of the concepts put forth during the second wave of feminism. Some post-feminists argue that feminism has become obsolete in contemporary culture.

Feminist literary critics and theorists examine literature to understand how it reflects women's public and private circumstances, as part of a broader social movement aimed at improving women's lives. Literature, like other art forms, offers a valuable avenue for exploring cultural experiences. Anne Ferguson points out, "Literary images do not exist in a vacuum . . . Literature both reflects and helps create our views of reality; it is through their preservation in works of art that we know what the stereotypes and archetypes have been and are" (qtd. in Stookey 123). Feminist critics analyze the portrayal of women in literary texts to identify and examine the underlying assumptions that influence a society's understanding of gender.

Feminist critics analyze the representation of women and their experiences in literary texts, examining the works of both male and female writers. Textual analyses of male-authored works provide valuable insights into men's perceptions and expectations of women, shedding light on their attitudes towards women and their idealized notions of femininity. Feminist critics investigate women's own writings to explore the concept of womanhood. Women writers' self-portraits reflect their reactions to the social and political contexts they experience. Mary Anne Ferguson observes, "The greatest change in literary images of women over the past two decades is the degree to which women writers have attempted to construct a womanly perspective and make women central in their works" (qtd. in Stookey 123).

Feminist literary theorists aim to comprehend the societal roles of women and question established norms that limit women's options. Feminist critics appreciate the inclusion of women's experiences and points of view in language and literature, which have historically been male-dominated. Feminist critics assert that the literary works of both male and female writers have the potential to redefine the social status of women and address the historical power imbalance between genders.

Louise Erdrich is a writer who examines women's aspirations, anxieties, desires, and decisions, illustrating their process of establishing fresh identities. Her novels depict what Vice Passaro characterizes as "a leading and profoundly redemptive role for women" (qtd. in Stookey 139 & 140).

3. Textual Analysis :

Erdrich's books have garnered consistent praise from critics and readers for her remarkable portrayal of female characters. Erdrich explores the capacity of women to seek retribution and endure in her writing. She notes that women have been instructed to display their modest faces to society, while these faces frequently conceal the untamed vitality that transmutes them into something different from their apparent nature. Upon acknowledging and asserting their authority, women uncover their authentic essence that lies concealed beneath the societal conditioning manifested in their modest faces. Erdrich posits that women get the realization of their ability to assert themselves and say "NO" when they recognize their inherent strength; a term that is typically not emphasized in their upbringing.

Tales of Burning Love is divided into four distinct sections, containing forty-seven chapters. The text presents a compilation of narratives centered on the numerous spouses of an insolvent real estate developer named Jack Mauser. While Argus is featured in several scenes, the primary setting of the novel is Fargo, North Dakota. The main events of the plot occur in 1994 and 1995, but *Tales of Burning Love* also includes several flashbacks, one of which recounts June's final Easter Sunday in 1981. When four out of the five women who were previously married to Jack Mauser were stranded in a blizzard, similar to that in which Lipsha was stranded, they make a collective decision to stay awake by recounting the stories of their life, namely their experiences with Jack. Additionally, they discuss subjects that have traditionally been regarded as sacred and prohibited, including their aspirations, gratifications, and personal closeness. Jack had five wives named June, Eleanor, Candice, Marlis, and Dot.

June, Jack's first spouse, wedded him subsequent to their encounter at a bar where she was awaiting transportation to return to the reservation. Under the influence of excessive alcohol consumption, they hastily entered into matrimony. The situation proves disastrous, prompting June to depart and walk home on a winter night, ultimately resulting in her demise. Eleanor, Jack's second spouse, entered into marriage with him as an act of revenge, motivated by his role in the dissolution of her parents' relationship. He wed Candice following her successful persuasion to spare the life of a stray



dog. He entered into marriage with Marlis subsequent to a fortuitous encounter that involved saving one another. Dot married him mistakenly. She was unaware of his chaotic financial situation and had no knowledge of his multiple ex-wives. Throughout the narrative, Jack becomes a subject of discussion among women.

Feminism is concerned with women's stories and experiences. Hence, feminist literary criticism can be applied to the analysis of Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*, as it delves into various topics relevant to women's worries and concerns, examines women's aspirations and desires, while also reflecting on the theme of motherhood through a vivid scene of birth-giving where Marlis and Candice resort to barking and howling like dogs to alleviate the pain of labor. In addition, the novel explores women's sexuality, including both scenes of heterosexual and lesbian relationships.

Gender representations in literary texts challenge traditional stereotypes of male and female roles and behaviors. In the novel, the character named Jack Mauser initially exhibits a stereotypical indifference and lack of awareness towards the needs of those around him. Throughout the narrative, Jack's absence of empathy becomes evident by his inability to communicate or recall the name of his first wife; this persists until the final chapters of the book. Only after his death do those who knew him realize that he gradually becomes attentive to the interests and perspectives of others. Finally, during the blizzard, he experiences the sensation of "protective love" (380) that a parent feels for their child. Subsequently, upon perceiving in Candice's eyes "the depth of her feeling for Marlis" (428), he exhibits genuine regret for succumbing to Marlis's sexual advances.

In *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich employs Jack's staged demise as a means to symbolize the archetypal careless and self-centered male. Jack's understanding of his wives' identities is only achieved after experiencing a series of crises in his life. However, the stories of these women demonstrate their individual attempts to disclose their true selves to him. Marlis displayed significant frustration towards her spouse's lack of attention. In response to Jack's refusal to prioritize his marriage and child, she devised a plan to enact retribution. Marlis is determined to communicate to Jack the injustices and suffering she has endured on his behalf. In pursuit of this objective, she restrains him to his bed during his sleep. Upon awakening, she conveys to him the statement, "It hurts to be girl," and subsequently illustrates the implications of her remark. The woman meticulously shapes Jack's eyebrows, devoting a significant amount of time "evening and straightening the line" (333). Subsequently, she employs a hot wax kit to eliminate the hair on his legs. Afterwards, she proceeds to pierce his ears and style his hair with rollers. Furthermore, she utilizes Super Glue to affix a large pair of "red and spiked" (334) high heels to his feet.

Erdrich's intention to present her fictional characters as fully grown individuals rather than conforming to stereotypes is evident in her depictions of both men and women. The female characters in *Tales of Burning Love* reveal both flaws and resilience, demonstrating their ability to endure both a blizzard and their relationships with Jack. Jack, as a survivor, demonstrates endurance by overcoming societal expectations and resisting the urge to conform to stereotypical male roles.

The Antelope Wife incorporates both realistic and magical elements, drawing inspiration from Erdrich's Native American heritage. The involvement of magic within the context of a realistic narrative categorizes *The Antelope Wife* as a work of magical realism. *The Antelope Wife* incorporates both realistic and magical elements, drawing inspiration from Erdrich's Native American heritage. The involvement of magic within the context of a realistic narrative categorizes *The Antelope Wife* as a work of magical realism. The narrative commences with a traditional story about twin sisters whose intricate beadwork ⁽¹⁾ is responsible for the creation of the world. The novel discusses women's experiences and focuses on the stories of women who have discovered their inherent ability to refuse and say "no." The bayoneted grandmother, Matilda/Other Side of the Earth, Sweetheart Calico, Mary and Zosie, and Rozin all resist male attempts to control women, objectify them, or dictate their existence. These women embody the concept of the "antelope wife," an illustration of women who draw upon their own strength to embrace their true selves.

Scranton Roy is a cavalryman who participates in a military-supported assault on an Ojibwe Native American village following the American Civil War. During the attack, he fatally wounds an elderly woman referred to as the bayoneted grandma, who is briefly introduced in the opening pages of the narrative. Her murder serves as a catalyst for Scranton Roy to fully comprehend the horrifying nature of his actions. Scranton Roy has assumed the responsibility of determining the fate of this woman by killing her. "Eager, he bayoneted an old woman who set upon him with no other weapon but a stone picked from the ground. . . He braced himself against her to pull free, set his boot between her legs to tug the blade from her stomach, and as he did so tried to avoid her eyes but did not manage" (Erdrich 16). Nevertheless,



the narrator reintroduces this female character in the final chapter of the novel, therefore emphasizing that she is not merely dead to Scranton. She undergoes a transformation and becomes a young woman who possesses the ability to influence the future of Roy's own family through his grandson, Augustus. By turning into a ghost and refusing to be completely destroyed, she challenges the authority of the man who subjected her to the state of being deceased. "His fever built and Scranton saw her again. The old woman came to stand beside his bed this time and gestured flat-handed at the bloody hole his bayonet had made in her stomach. Her voice was oddly young, high and lilting, and she spoke to him in her language for a long time. He did not understand the words, but knew the meaning" (Erdrich 249).

Disturbed by his actions, Roy saves an infant named Matilda from the assault and raises her as his own daughter. While Matilda "loves him like nothing else. He is her father, her human" (Erdrich 23) and appreciates the care he provided during her childhood, she refuses to accept Roy's plans for her future. Blue Prairie Woman, the mother, is deeply saddened by her daughter's sudden absence. After a decade-long quest, she ultimately finds Matilda and resolves to bring her back to the community. Matilda is aware that she must assume a different identity when her mother arrives. Consequently, she writes a concise message using a handwriting that closely matches his, and embarks on the journey back home with her mother, who unfortunately passes away before they reach their destination. Initially, Other Side of the Earth/Matilda is unsure about the location of her home, but she promptly realizes that it is situated in the country of the antelope when she observes a peculiar group of antelope and trails them.

(1) Beadwork is a traditional art that is considered to be very special in some Native American cultures. Erdrich uses the image of twin sisters sewing beadwork to represent the ongoing creation of the world and life.

Zosie and Mary share a mutual affection for Augustus Roy. Both women are, in turn, adored by Augustus, who is captivated by the enigma of his wife's dual identity. Following Mary's confession to Zosie that she is also involved romantically with Augustus, the twins jointly present themselves to their spouse and alternate in visiting him in bed. This agreement could have persisted indefinitely, but each twin requests Augustus to address her by her individual name whenever she enters his bed. However, he yearns to own both ladies. He exerts control over the twins by devising a plan to permanently mark one of them with a symbol representing the difference they want to conceal, as such challenging his acquired power.

Sweetheart Calico and Rozin are both coveted by men and both refuse to be owned by them. The two women are commonly referred to as "the antelope women," as they are direct descendants of Matilda, who entered into a marital union with an antelope among the herd she became a part of. Klaus develops an intense and irrational infatuation with Sweetheart Calico, which compels him to abduct her. She is physically apprehended and carried from her residence in Montana to the alien surroundings of the urban area. Devoid of a name, unable to speak, and transformed in appearance, she is resolute in her refusal to be possessed. Klaus consistently use the possessive term "my" when contemplating her, however what he possesses is actually an illusion derived from his yearning for her. Klaus is driven to madness by her peculiar and seemingly otherworldly behavior, ultimately resulting in his descent into homelessness and alcoholism. Rozin swiftly developed strong feelings for Frank, Klaus' sibling, despite being in a marital relationship with Richard. Rozin finds Richard's accusations to be intricate due to their previous relationship, the shared children, and her own feelings of guilt. However, she unequivocally denies the validity of these claims by asserting that her spouse does not have ownership over her. At last, she makes the decision to get married to Frank, who was tragically killed by Richard in front all of them. Both Rozin and Sweetheart Calico face severe consequences for defying the men who seek to impose their authority over them.

4. Conclusion :

Native American literature, often known as Indian literature or American Indian literature, encompasses the oral and written works of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. It emphasizes the crucial role that women had in both creating and preserving indigenous culture and traditions. Louise Erdrich, a prominent figure of the Native American Renaissance, is a very prominent author who explores themes of women's rights, personal identity, and land ownership. Her specific focus lies in depicting the resilience of indigenous women within a patriarchal society. Consequently, her literary works garnered the interest of feminist critics. As part of a broader societal movement that examines the portrayal of women and their varied experiences in literary works, Feminism can be used to analyze Erdrich's novels. *Tales of Burning Love* is a series of narratives detailing the lives of the multiple wives of Jack Mauser as they managed



to survive a lizard and seek retribution on Jack. *The Antelope Wife* explores the experiences of various women who possess the strength to assert their autonomy, say “NO” and reject the attempts of males to objectify and exploit them for their own gratification.

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