DAASHKIKAA AND COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM IN THE ANTELOPE WIFE – A METAPHORIC INTERPRETATION OF ERDRICH'S WRITING

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Abstract: The present study aims at demonstrating the way in which "The Antelope Wife" written by Louise Erdrich can be understood through a metaphoric interpretation. The world described in Erdrich's writing appears to be both homogenous and heterogenous, but, in fact, there are ways in which they protrude in order to blend both spirituality and the modern society into a conglomerate that has the power to transfer the individual existence into another world, like a metaphoric process.

Keywords: Daashkikaa, metaphoric, belief, twins, entanglement, oppositions.

Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* is about Native American traditions and beliefs blended into a modern society. The entire plot revolves around the idea of merging the two layers in such a manner that the strong, clearly visible, aspect of myth in the Native American culture goes under the superficial modern culture. This submerging is clearly described through the social networking that evolves in the novel almost like a never ending spiderweb. "Erdrich is often celebrated for her poetic prose and the intricate layers of interwoven narrative voices that inform her work – a style that, in its intimate attention to place and identity has been compared to that of William Faulkner" (Lopenzina, 2020:1).

The storyline includes entire fragments that can be analyzed separately in oder to fully observe their metaphoric content. Moreover, through an in-depth analysis, the relationship with the Native American folklore and with the main frame of the story remains not only untouched, but it also displays the true semantic potential of Erdrich's writing.

From the very first part, there is a true startling moment, the one in which Scranton Roy kills the woman in the Indian village: "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. His gaze was drawn into hers and he sank with it into the dark unaccompanied moment before his birth. There was a word she uttered in her language. Daashkikaa. Daashkikaa. A groan of heat and blood" (Erdrich, 2002:4).

The core meaning of the entire book can be found in the previously mentioned quote, especially the utterance *Daashkikaa*, which roughly translates into "intertwined". *Daashkikaa* is an Ojibwa word and it could also mean 'cracked apart'. As Native American novelists learned to write in English, "they also mastered literary forms like the novel, adapting these genres to serve indigenous worldviews. Native writers still experiment with language in a way that incorporates oral literatures that have long connected indigenous nations with ancestors and lands, and shaped their communal identities as distinct peoples" (Teuton, 2018:3).

This fundamental connection appears to be created since the eye contact made by Scranton with his victim, mainly because of the effect the indigenous woman had on him. This being said, Scranton Roy appears to be taken back to the moment before his birth, meaning at the beginning of the creation of his own life. This *regressus ad uterum* symbolically represents the return to the age of innocence, a kind of rebirth in the old cultures. It is a transfer to a new

level of existence. It is a powerful motif that leads us to the interpretation of the future of Scranton being fundamentally affected by this event. This ”meeting” also has the meaning of the worlds colliding and melting one into the other creating a hybrid that will develop both in a physical way through the strange event of the lactation and in a moral way in the manner in which people with different origins (Native and non-Native American people) will live together as a society.

Following the previous section, the next fragment also depicts the tragic birth of a child: ”Scranton wrapped the baby in the skin of a dog and kissed the smoothed, ravaged temples of Peace with tender horror at the pains of his own mother, and of all mothers, and of the unfair limitations of our bodies, of the hopeless settlement of our life tasks, and finally, of the boundless iniquity of the God to whom she had so uselessly shrieked. *Look at her*, he called the unseen witness. And perhaps God did or Peace McKnight’s mind, pitilessly wracked, finally came out of hiding and told her heart to beat twice more. A stab of fainting gold heeled through a scrap of window. Peace saw the wanton gleam, breathed out, gazed out. And then, as she stepped from her ripped body into the utter calm of her new soul, Peace McKnight saw her husband put his son to his breast” (Erdrich, 2002:17).

This brutal, philosophical but most importantly, naturalistic fragment displays beyond the affection that Scranton carries for both the birthing mother and her newborn, the way in which the physical world is understood through a metaphysical perspective. Making it clearer, although his wife, Peace, dies giving birth, this is poetically understood through the passing of her soul into the one of her children, in a calm and divine atmosphere where sun witnesses the birth through the scrap of a window. It appears that nature accompanies the entire birthing process, equivocal being represented by the body which has the power to beat twice more in order for a successful birth to be realized. The metaphor of life and death is realized both implicitly and explicitly because we can understand it from the character attitude toward the imminent death in the occurring event and we can also see it directly in what happens in this scene. The traditional Native American religions ”are integrated totally into daily activities. They are ways of life and not sets of priciples or credal formulations” (Weaver, 1997:VII).

The concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, that is coincidence of opposites, refers to situations or events or instances where aprioric oppositions are both simultaneously true. A duality is such a situation in which two opposite situations exist at the same time. We live in a world of duality: male and female, night and day, earth and sky: ”Earth and sky touch everywhere and nowhere, like sex between two strangers. There is no definition and no union for sure. If you chase that line, it will retreat from you at the same pace you set. Heart pounding, air burning in your chest, you’ll pursue. Only humans see that line as an actual place. But like love, you’ll never get there. You’ll never catch it. You’ll never know” (Erdrich, 2002:21).

This is the way in which Chapter Two of the book starts, stating with the previously mentioned quote a very important delimitation of the way in which the relations between the book characters develop. The quote gives a metaphoric depiction of the way in which love should be understood in this book: a natural (as earth and sky) and universal (as strangers) bound that goes beyond our knowledge of what union means. Moreover, chasing the understanding of love only deepens its mystery and meaning. Making a full circle with the meaning of *Daashkikaa*, the universal connection between all things needs to be fulfilled both biologically, spiritually and emotionally. Futhermore, we can understand *earth* and *sky* as limits or opposites that are eternally bounded to chase each other into what is known in hermeneutics as *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The coincidence of opposites is one of the fundamental organizing principles in Jung’s thought. Key concepts such as the self, the collective unconscious, wholeness and synchronicity are said to be instances of the coincidence of opposites – and are also found in Erdrich’s book in different moments that we are going to see.

Moreover, in the very beginning of the book, there is the intro in which there is the story of a pair of twins, each one representing a particular side of things, a Native American version of the Yin and Yang. This is nothing more than another example of the coincidentia oppositorum acting as a resort for the Daashkikaa leitmotif. The twins are responsible for the moving the life was by affecting the balance of the world.

To add a more scientific perspective to the previous interpretative-explanatory fragment, it is worth to quote Mr. Simhachalam Thamarana, from the Department of English within the framework of Andhra University in India, who says the following: ”Another topic of interest in Native American literature is the concept of personal identity and definition. Again, the struggle between the external view and the internal view is stressed. The question of exactly who is classified as Native American is a controversial subject since classifications vary based on the criteria. People are classified by their family, their community or the government, and labels are distributed: ’full-bloods’ and ’half-bloods’ or even ’one-fourths’ and ’one-eighths’. More than merely a genetic categorization, a person is generally considered who they are by cultural, linguistic and religious standards. Ultimately racial definitions are inadequate, and it is one’s way of life that predominates in identification” (Simhachalam, 2015:3). As the Native American writer Geary Hobson considers: ”A person is judged as Native American because of how he or she views the world, his views about land, home, family, culture, etc” (quoted by Simhachalam, 2015:3).

Strengthening the connection with *The Antelope Wife*, we can easily understand the focus put by the Natives on the view upon the world, land, home, family or culture thinking about the fact that the tribal ceremonies or activities described in the book are strongly related with beliefs and sacred practices with their role being this metaphoric outlook where everything is a portal, a gateway to a deeper understanding.

Also, the quote ”The antelope are the only creatures swift enough to catch the distance, her sweeping looks say. *We live there. We live there in the place where sky meets earth*” (Erdrich, 2002:32) finally illustrates the profound semantic content of the quote we tried to analyze up to this point.

Although this novel is about people with strong beliefs, it is interesting to see that the irreversibility of time is really a fact for them, in contradiction with their intertwined perspective about everything: ”I would go back, if I could, unweave the pattern of destruction. Take it all apart occurrence by slow event. But how can you pick out the strands of all you might have changed and all you couldn’t?” (Erdrich, 2002: 36).

As we can easily figure out, Rozin has a desire of changing the past in order for her present to be according to her wish. But she does not simply want to change things in the past, but to ”unweave the pattern of destruction”, to go step by step into the prior actions. We can also hypothesize this interpretation as a *regressus ad uterum* depiction as we saw before.

”All of our actions have in their doing the seed of their undoing. So with my mother’s heart. And I marvel: That it should be a heart of rag wool knit and unknit by one same needle. That it should be a cloth first woven and then unraveled by its own loomed strength. That in her creation of her children there should be the unspeakable promise of their death, for by their birth she had created mortal beings. That in her love there should be failure to love. That in the sudden hatred she developed toward our father there should be the split cotyledon, the tongue, the trembling shoot of a sunless white passion” (Erdrich, 2002:59).

The previously presented quote is the way in which Chapter Six ends and also another example of this ”going-back” leitmotif. The ”seed of undoing” is a very interesting concept considering the Latin saying *Fugit irreparabile tempus*. The truth in this philosophical perspective lies in the part where it says that ”in her creation of her children there should be the unspeakable promise of their death”. This very sad but realistic quote represents the inner tragedy of every living creature when giving birth, that starting from that moment, time only

passes to the moment of death. Furthermore, the meaning of this quote could be also understood with the *coincidentia oppositorum* explanation.

Part Two of the novel or, more precisely, Chapter Ten, describes the deep meaning of *Nibi*, or in translation, water. Anticipated by the old woman's words, Klaus goes into a trance-like-state in which he encounters the Blue Fairy: "And he was right and she was down there. Klaus was watching her float toward him – his special woman – the Blue Fairy, merlady – a trembling beauty alive with Jell-O light, surrounded by a radiance of filtered sun and nuclear dust and splintered fish scales. The water was medicinal, bubbling, hot turquoise. She stopped for a moment, flying backward in the great muscle of the current pushing south. It tugged at her hair. She had to go, Klaus knew. Longing for her scorched him through and through. He stretched toward her with all of his soul, but she only looked back at him over her shoulder with her hungry black eyes. Gave a flick of her white-flag tail" (Erdrich, 2002:98).

This scene can be understood through a symbolic signification, the baptism. This set is a mix of a mythological encounter with a side-effect of a polluted water. It is, again, a proof of the intertwined worlds, the deeply traditional world of the Ojibwa cultural group and the modern, "nuclear" society. In this set, we can see the way in which Klaus submerges his head in order to see The Blue Fairy. The manner in which he does this is the way in which a wise lady told him in a previous chapter. The short meeting with The Blue Fairy remains, unfortunately, a mystery due to the unknown nature that caused it: a well followed ritual or an effect of the deeply polluted river.

The story unravels in the next chapter, Eleven, with more details about the procedure in which a particular individual gets its name. Also, the entire Part Three starts with a fragment in which a very odd tradition talks about how an "old grandma" died her beads using mixtures of her body fluids and other elements, each time obtaining a different color with an individual meaning.

Back to the naming part, the lines "What we do with our names is one thing. Where we get them is another" come somehow in opposite with what we, as "modern" people, tend to believe. We tend to believe that our actions, our history or even our ancestry or genealogy entitle us with such a powerful meaning deeply rooted in our names that we are defined by it. For the Native Americans, it appears that the given name at birth, even if it is one that was given before, has the potential to guide its bearer to a dimension of the self that maybe it was not even aware. That is why the so-called "namers" are special members of a Native American cultural group or tribe, with a connection to the spiritual side of the world in order to get a name with the previously mentioned potential. As a proof for the importance of naming in *The Antelope Wife*, Chapter Thirteen is dedicated to the story of Klaus's naming.

The final chapter of the book, Twenty-Three, comes as a resolution of the enigmatic and twisted book written by Louise Erdrich. "*Who knows whose blood sins we are paying for? What murder committed in another country, another time? The black-robe priests believe that Christ allowed himself to be nailed high on the cross in order to pay. Shawanos think different. Why should an innocent god, a manitou spirit, have to settle for our bad drunks, our rage, our heart-sown angers and mistakes? Those things should come down on us"* (Erdrich, 2002:237).

This reflexive thought of Scranton depicts the core conflict between our well-known Christian belief and the Shawanos' belief. This difference is uttered to be the way in which Christ came to pay for us, taking our sins into his universal death instead of a more direct way of paying the sins – actually you being responsible for them and assuming the consequences.

A final quote making again reference to the universal connection synthetized in the word Daashkikaa is shown in relation with Scranton Roy's family: "Everything is all knotted up in a tangle. Pull one string of this family and the whole web will tremble" (Erdrich, 2002:239). This quote and the following lines that are talking about the beads are a final portrayal of how everything is intertwined in ways known only by spirits. What is for us to

learn is that we are actants in a continuously evolving interpretation of our own lives and also of our lives in regard with everything else. Everything is a referent but we must never forget where did we start and that our actions have consequences we need to face every day, minute by minute.

As a reference quote, a piece of Native American wisdom is worth to be mentioned being related to the present topic: ”All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth” Chief Seattle Suqwamish and Duwamish (quoted by Nerburn, 1999:3). Thus, all things are connected; there is neither a beginning, nor an end; there is the circle of life specific to the Native American realm.

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