THE NATIVE AMERICAN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN ERDRICH'S MULTILAYERED FICTION

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on family relationships of all types within the framework of Louise Erdrich's novel entitled "The Antelope Wife", a complex, multilayered book conveying multiple messages about the Native American way of life and how relationships can evolve. Each family consists of individuals who interact with each other, develop feelings, and establish relationships, such as: sister and sister, mother and daughter, husband and wife, and so on. However, due to various factors, these relationships can undergo significant changes. This study presents the different types of family relationships and the meaning behind the lines. Being a family does not mean being connected by blood, but feeling like a family, even if it has just two members. The characters are interconnected, and their lives are influenced by others' actions or feelings. Parents have a big impact on children, and this essay shows how their decisions affect the little ones. The relationships between the current generation, like Cally, and ancestors are important. Knowing your past and culture can help you understand yourself and even your family.

Keywords: family, relationships, ancestors, impact, generations, culture.

Louise Erdrich is a famous Native American writer and "one of the most accomplished and promising novelists of any heritage now working in the United States" (Beidler & Barton, 2006:3).

In Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife,* we can see how a family comes into being in unexpected moments. Life can lead to unexpected family relationships. The challenge lies in maintaining and nurturing these relationships. Difficult moments test each family and individual, requiring them to take decisions. In the end, whether we have a bond by blood or by choice, family provides a source of strength, support and belonging that sustains us through life's many challenges.

The structure of the Native American "family network is radically different from other extended family units in Western society. The traditional European family network on which most traditional American families are patterned is limited to three generations within a single household. American Indian family networks, however, are more structurally open" (Light & Martin, 1986:1).

From the sociological perspective,"families can take on many functional and acceptable forms, and a wide diversity of familial structures could be found in native America while each family has discrete charactersitics, in general they can be condensed into a handful of archetypes with real families falling into a gray region between the black and white features of particular types (...): nuclear families, extended families, stem-nuclear families, and clan-like families" (Volo & Volo, 2007: VIII).

The Antelope Wife is a Native American story and such stories "hold the conflicts and compliments of family and situations which test their relationships" (Pijoan, 2011). The novel is very rich in all sorts of conflicts and tensions, which affect certain characters, but it also presents situations when tensions are eased and people live unique and unforgettable moments in their lives.

Scranton Roy begins to raise a baby girl who is not his own. He tries to comfort the baby making her feel safe, but nothing seems to work, he "cradled the baby, sang lewd camp tunes, then stalwart hymns, and at last remembered his own mother's lullabies" (Erdrich,

2002:6). As Scranton Roy continues to care for the baby girl, he finds himself drawn deeper into a sense of paternal love and responsibility. Despite the initial challenges in comforting her, he persists, determined to provide her with the love and security she deserves. The little girl becomes his little family, and he tries to remember what his mother did when he was a child. From this moment on, his life changes, Scranton gradually transforms from a solitary individual into a loving father figure.

Even if it is not a human, in Roy's life and family, the dog is present. In hard times, the dog is there and even sleeps with the man. The dog seems to be close to Roy and when Mathilda comes in their lives, he does not disappear. The dog tried to help the man and little girl by hunting for a rabbit and by sleeping next to them. This shows that an animal can become part of a family, a family member, and bring beauty and comfort to anyone's life during challenging moments.

Scranton Roy names the little girl Mathilda and starts acting as her father. Like any parent, he wants his daughter to go to school. Roy has the opportunity to meet Miss McKnight, who is his daughter's teacher. After a while, they fell in love, and Roy's family expanded.

When Mathilda saw her teacher kiss her father, her reaction was not the best and was visible that she was affected about what she saw. The little girl's reaction was as if time had stopped because she was in complete shock. It is normal for a little girl who had always had her father's full attention and love to react this way. The family began to grow until a son appeared in their lives. Sadly, the child passed away due to an illness. This was a devastating event for the family and it had a profound impact on them.

The novel continues with the story of Mathilda's real mother, Blue Prairie Woman. Her life was tumultuous, particularly her family experiences. Before her passing away, she spends time with her daughter, Mathilda, and it becomes obvious how strong the bond is between mother and daughter, despite not being together since Mathilda was a baby. This moment illustrates the closeness they share even if they did not live or did not have the chance to stay for a longer time together, as the girl "sings her mother's song, holding her mother's hand in one hand" (Erdrich, 2002:19) to feel closer to her.

The novel is structured interestingly, allowing us to see various types of family relationships. A new relationship is formed between Rozin and Richard, who decide to get married. However, their lives change when Rozin informs her husband that her "old lover, Frank Shawano, is dying of cancer [...] and that she is going to him now, leaving their marriage, to be with this man until he dies because after all she truly loves him" (Erdrich, 2002:61-62).

She has children with Richard, but her heart and mind are with Frank. The only reason she stayed with Richard for years was for the girls. Her decision to leave ruins the relationship. In my opinion, it is better to leave than to do something worse and negatively impact the children. The relationship between wife and husband is portrayed sadly and realistically for some families. Unfortunately, in this family, the worst thing a parent can go through happens after their discussion.

We can see how one of the twins, Deanna, realizes that something is wrong in their family. Because she loves her sister, Cally, she prefers not to tell her about what she knows. All of it because Deanna does not want to make her sad. She is an important character in this family. Thinking that she can save the situation and make their family relationship work again, she will disappear forever from her family's life.

Deanna sees the motor running and thinks her father wants to leave the house and his family, sadly, her father wanted to commit suicide but changed his mind at the last moment. When he thought about it, he realized he has two girls and that he loves a woman madly. The rhetorical questions describe how aware of the consequences of a possible suicide he starts to

be ”And what is he doing anyway? What kind of father? He will always be a father” (Erdrich, 2002:70). He forgot to start the car engine in the closed garage and, unfortunately, something really bad is going to happen again in this family. Deanne dies wanting to save her family while waiting her father to come back in the car. The gas from the car was fatal for the child.

The relationship between mother and daughter again is portrayed by Rozin and Cally. Rozin takes care of her daughter and tries to comfort her maternally when Cally is sick. Their relationship is unique and we can see how Rozin tries to calm her only daughter who is alive by ”slowly singing, she wipes up and down the pole arms” (Erdrich, 2002:88) and by being presents when she is sick. This image is a powerful depiction of a mother’s love and tenderness, the main characters being Rozin and Cally.

The bond between twin sisters is incredibly strong. Cally and Deanne are a great example of this. After Deanne’s passing away, Cally fell ill right after probably because she lost a part of herself by losing her twin. Their family life has forever changed after the loss. Over time, Cally began to feel that her sister was often with her. In her mind, she could hear Deanne speaking ”in her little-girl voice, in my own voice” (Erdrich, 2002:122), almost like a little angel who was always present. Even if Deanne may have physically left this world, her spirit lived on in the heart and mind of her twin sister. This touching image beautifully captures the strength and love that exists in a twin’s bond.

Rozin and Richard’s relationship continues to be dysfunctional. He is a jealous man who cannot understand that she has a different life and a different lover and that their marriage is over. Their connection has come to an end, and if they had continued, it would have been a real disaster. Richard has the idea that nobody can have Rozin. His desperation can be observed in the scene when he says,”You tell me you got married to another man and you meant to do it and you wanted him the same way you wanted me?” (Erdrich, 2002:176).

His way of seeing Rozin portrays an obsessed man, and the love he has towards her is toxic. He wants to manipulate her to be together again, saying, ”I made love to you as though you were the most special thing on the face of the earth. An angel” (Erdrich, 2002:176). In the end, he kills himself, leaving behind his only daughter, Cally.

It is tough to recover after a parent’s death. Cally had to deal with this trauma and stay strong. Even if a relationship with a person, whether it is a lover or a parent, is not the best, some scars remain after they commit suicide. Being aware that something is not right in your life, having parents with troubles in their relationship, experiencing the premature death since childhood of your sister, and now your dad’s decision to end his life can make you feel like you’re losing control.

In Cally’s situation, it is about losing the sense of time, and not being aware that life moves on. For her, Richard’s death ”seemed like a year had passed [...] it could have been a week, it could have been a year, it could have been the rest of my life” (Erdrich, 2002:198). This relationship between father and daughter is different from Mathilda and Roy’s relationship. Cally loved her father and her father loved her, Deanne and Rozin, but in his way, in a jealous and toxic way.

Cally is a character who tries to analyze her family to understand more about her ancestors. Even though her life can be categorized as traumatic and chaotic, she wants to know more and see the relationships throughout the generations. She understands that family represents tradition, with ancestors who had an impact and helped shape who they are. More importantly, she learns that everything is connected.

The Antelope Wife written by Louise Erdrich is a complex novel in many ways. This book is about Native Americans but can be applied to many other people. The reality is portrayed very interestingly being context dependent.

Family relationships are everywhere, even if we are talking about good or bad ones. Each family is different and each member of it has his ideas, feelings, past, life and ancestors. Despite their differences, every family shares the potential for unexpected events to occur.

Cally and Deanne are two characters calling the readers' attention. They have an important role in their family, even if one of them dies at a young age, she is a key person in the story and life. The connection between past and present, between a member of a family and another, makes the whole book truly unique. A family relationship is not just about love and about having kids; it is about many other types of relationships and events that influence it.

Erdrich "experienced within her closely knit family circle the strong sense of connection to community that emerges as a theme in each of her novels. Erdrich indeed remains especially close to her family" (Stooker, 1999:1).

Louise Erdrich has created families, which are the outcome of two different traditions: on the one hand, the Native American culture and on the other hand, the Western traditions brought by the Catholic missionaries who sought to "civilize" the Native American cultural group (Sanders, 1998). These dissimilarities convey contradictory messsages of power and place for men and women.

According to Jay Miller, "For American Indians, family is the most important thing in life. Names are important, too, because they give people an identity and say who their ancestors are. Families and names can affect who someone marries, how they grow up, and even how they talk" (Miller, 1996:5).

The novel is complex because of the change of generations and it can make it seem a little bit chaotic. Anyway, the events from this book can become a reality and can change our family relationships in a good or bad way at any moment. The Native American families have "strengths – respect, generosity, harmony within the context of spirituality" (Light & Martin, 1986:1).

Erdrich's fiction displays a clash of cultures. And the outcome of cultural tensions is confusion. In fact, Louise Erdrich's fiction presents the Native Americans' survival and their fight to regain their cultural heritage and repattern their search for identity.

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