THE DYNAMICS OF LAND, PLACE AND SPACE IN THE TALE OF SURVIVANCE: LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*

Pritha Chakraborty

Assistant Professor
Post-Graduate Department of English
Maulana Azad College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to analyze the dynamics of land, ecology, place and space in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*, in order to locate the narration of a tale of survivance. It would attempt to interpret the nuances of the fictional places and spaces in the novel through the critical theories of Edward Soja, Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan.

***Index Terms* – Allotment, Ecology, Survivance, Secondspace, Thirdspace.**

"There is no place like home. What is home? It is the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown, or motherland....Space and place are basic components of the lived world..." (Tuan 3).

In his book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, the eminent geographer Yi-Fu Tuan elaborates on how "people ... respond to space and place in complicated ways" (Tuan 4). He cites specific examples to depict how "the meaning of space" (Tuan 3) is rooted in an individual's "experience" (Tuan 3); what is intimate and comfortable for some appears as claustrophobic to others. Furthermore, he explains the relationship between the two terms 'place' and 'space': "From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa" (Tuan 6). This forms the crux of our understanding as to how the diverse personages in Karen Louise Erdrich's third novel, *Tracks* (1988) view their circumambient space from a subjective positionality and by default, shed light on the external and internal divisive forces that have disrupted the communal bonds of the Native Americans. Moreover, the manner in which the protagonists of the novel view the places and spaces they inhabit is also a determiner of the close bond that the American Indians have with the natural world. In the course of this paper, I would seek to explore the myriad dimensions of places and spaces depicted in this novel and their significance in its narrative discourse.

Louise Erdrich, the Chippewã [or Ojibwe] writer was seminal in ushering the second wave of Native American Literary "renascence" in the 1980s. Rather than being a rebirth of American Indian Literature, this was a vigorous uprising. Erdrich's importance as a writer has dual significance—as a woman writer and as a *Metis* (mixed-blood), she has played a significant role in incorporating ethnic techniques of storytelling in her narrative art and yet has effectively communicated with the mainstream multicultural readers. She has overcome the cultural strife of writing in the English language by embedding techniques of oral culture into it. Thus, her novels become "hybridized dialogue" (Owens 14) concomitant with a subversive design. Erdrich's novels interrogate what Gerald Vizenor terms as the 'terminal creeds' and defy a homogenous depiction of the American Indian identity.

Land had always been the bone of contention between the Native Americans and the white settlers. After the American Revolution in the eighteenth century, numerous treaties and land cessation had finally led to the creation of reservations. The history of the American Indians is replete with the 'trail of tears', the westward relocation, the forceful confinement in concentration camps, surrender of home and land, relocation to 'reservations' and the irrational land allotment system. The Indian Reorganization Act had its limitations and the Termination Policy ensued that "states could extend civil and criminal jurisdiction over Indian tribes" (Wiget 166). Thus, Relocation Programs have majorly been an exercise of the "program of replacement" (Wiget 170). Even in 2016, Naomi Schaefer Riley wrote:

> Reservation land is held "in trust" for Indians by the federal government. The goal of this policy was originally to keep Indians contained to certain lands. Now, it has shifted to preserving these lands for indigenous peoples. But the effect is the same. Indians can't own land, so they can't build equity. This prevents American Indians from reaping numerous benefits.

This preoccupation with the loss of land is projected in Erdrich's novel, *Tracks*, through the spatial representations, and also through the novelist's sharp critique of the governmental policies regarding reservations and land holdings. This objective of the novelist is aptly expressed through Erdrich's mouthpiece, Nanapush: "Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder.... And as for government promises, the wind is steadier" (33).

Tracks traces the travails of its protagonists in North Dakota from the Winter of 1912 to the Spring of 1924 through the voices of its two homodiegetic narrators. The five odd chapters comprise the tribal patriarch, Nanapush, recounting the past of his surrogate daughter, Fleur Pillager, to her daughter, Lulu. On the other hand, the four even chapters are narrated by the unreliable narrator, Pauline Puyat, who blatanlty lies and often modifies Nanapush's version according to her own convenience. While the former's approach to the pivotal character of Fleur is tinged with paternal affection, the latter is envious and projects Fleur as a malevolent spirit.

The action of the novel shifts between the Indian reservation and the nearby fictitious town of Argus in North Dakota. In an endnote to her novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), Erdrich mentioned that the "reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations. It is an emotional collection of places dear to me, as is the town of Argus" (*The Last Report* 357). This is a throwback to her

childhood in Wahpeton, North Dakota. Moreover, due to her maternal grandfather (who was the tribal chairman of the Turtle Mountain Reservation), Erdrich herself is an enrolled member of the North Dakota Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa.

Tracks, begins with a description of the disease-infested reservation in the winter of 1912, and the claustrophobic ambience is evoked in Nanapush's decription: "On the reservation, where we were forced close together, the clans dwindled" (2) due to consumption. Nanapush was the only survivor in his Anishinabe tribe but he was resilient enough to refuse to sign "the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake" (2). He also rescued the last Pillager, Fleur, from her family's cabin near Matchimanito Lake. The magical nature of the cabin is conveyed by the fact that although the tribal police, Edgar Pukwan, tried to burn down the house in accordance to the Agency's quarantine policy, "the flames narrowed and shrank, went out in puffs of smoke" (3). It was believed that the lake was inhabited by the monster, Misshepeshu, and even the surveyors were full of fear while measuring the lake. Nanapush brushes aside the popular belief that the dissatisfied spirits of the dead Pillagers have been the harbingers of trouble. He has enough clarity of perception to realize that: "Our trouble came from living, from liquor and the dollar bill. We stumbled toward the government bait, ... never noticing how the land was snatched from under us at every step" (4). He keeps on mentioning the government's exploitative policies whereby it had bought allotment land from the impoverished Native people at a meagre price. He continues how some of the American Indians wanted to "refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like a pattern of straws" (8). Despite his warning, the young Fleur decides to stay alone in the Matchimanito cabin. The death and disappearance of some of the Agents, who went to ask Fleur for fee money on the allotments, and also of the surveyors, gave rise to extensive gossip about her supernatural powers. However, Nanapush is observant enough to notice that though some of these men were lost or died in the deep woods, some wagons returned, "loaded high with hard green wood" (9), signifying the deforestation engendered by lumbering. Through Nanapush, Erdrich not only voices the unfair treatment meted out to the Native American people but also obliquely critiques the ecological invasiveness: "...one oak went down, another and another was lost, as a gap formed here, a clearing there ...." (9).

In her essay entitled "Native, Mexican and Multicultural American Literatures", Krishna Sen explicates Gerald Vizenor's 'Postindian Survivance', as enunciated in his *Manifest Manners* (1994): "'Postindian' in transcending white stereotypes, and 'survivance' or 'trickster hermeneutics' to subvert white dominance. Survivance also involves recuperating the originary culture." (Sen and Sengupta 280-281). The dual and often conflicting narratives of Nanapush and Pauline in *Tracks* respectively embody the juxtaposition of the traditional and the alienated voices of the Native American community. Exploring the depiction and interpretation of places and spaces by these two alternating narrators and identifying the reasons for their antithetical perspectives offer interesting insights into the divisiveness of the families residing in the reservation. While Nanapush, whose name is based on the Anishinabe trickster, *nanibozhu*, represents this trickster hermeneutics (along with Fleur), Pauline toes the line of white hegemony, choosing to flaunt her half-white identity rather than her half-Indian lineage.

Through a radical technique of postmodernist narratology, Pauline presents a version of Fleur that challenges and contests the one narrated by Nanapush. She projects the latter as the beloved of "Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster" (11) and tries to corroborate her theory by mentioning Fleur's survival despite drowning thrice in the lake. According to Pauline, Fleur "messed with evil" (12) and she even mentions the latter's transformation into a bear. When Fleur goes to the town of Argus, looking for work, Pauline acerbically observes: "She almost destroyed that town" (12). Argus is described as "just a grid of six streets on either side of the railroad depot" (12); it is a binary opposite of Fleur's cabin by the lake: "The water there was surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers, who knew the secret ways to cure or kill, until their art deserted them" (2). By contrasting the town with the Matchimanito cabin, Erdrich adroitly differentiates the mechanical nature of the town from the organic essence of the reservation. Pauline's father had initially tried to warn her against the decision to stay at Argus with her relatives: "You'll fade out there....You won't be an Indian once you return" (14). Pauline however is determined to deny her roots and even shuns her own native language, speaking only in English. She refuses to follow the Native American ways of beading, preserving animal skin or making quill baskets. She is unable to grasp Fleur's reason for staying in the cabin alone, thinking that the latter is the beloved of the water-monster, Misshepeshu. Opposed to this, Fleur is keen on staying close to her roots as a strategy of 'cultural survivance' ('survival' of the ethnic culture and 'resistance' against dominant Euroamerican influences).

Fleur's sexual assault at the hands of the men in the butcher shop at Argus is followed by a violent storm: "... everything in Argus fell apart and got turned upside down, smashed, and thoroughly wrecked" (28). The three men who had raped Fleur had sought shelter inside the shop's freezer, where they got locked from outside. This results in the death of Tor and Lily, while Dutch James is barely alive. Ironically, the locker, which was meant to serve a preservational function, turns into the site of death of the two rapists, who were found "entirely dead, frozen solid" (31). Erdrich reverses the functional role of the freezer in order to represent the nemesis of the three men who belong to a world of patriarchal chauvinism. Tor, Lily and Dutch found it difficult to accept Fleur's prowess as a gambler, which is essentially a male preoccupation in the town. They also felt threatened by her empowered self-sufficiency as a bread-earner. These gave rise to a repressed anger that culminates in the sexual assault. Pauline tries to insinuate that Fleur's sinister designs killed the two workers of Kozka's Meats and crippled the third. However it is later known that it was Pauline herself who had bolted the locker door from outside and her exhilaration at the sight of death gives her persona a darker tinge as opposed to the sainthood towards which she aspires after entering the convent. Fleur returns to her ancestral cabin in Matchimanito and has to pay annual fee for every Pillager allotment that she has inherited. She realizes that her true home is in the reservation and confides in Nanapush: "I shouldn't have left this place" (18). The interspersed narratives of Nanapush and Pauline are markers of the novelist's dexterous craft whereby she presents the rooted and the alienated American Indian respectively in order to convey the rifts occurring within the Native American psyche. Pauline's religious frenzy in the novel's final chapters, which almost brinks on lunacy, "epitomizes the extremity of lost identity" (Owens 216).

Erdrich has set *Tracks* in the early twentieth century "that crucial moment in history when the Chippewa began to see with a grim finality the last portion of their traditional lives slipping rapidly away" (Owens 212). She repeatedly mentions the "wholesale purchase of our land by whites" (98), how "land was snatched from under us at every step" (4) and the surreptitious acquisition of Native lands by the Turcot lumber company for commercial exploitation. Nanapush misses the expanse of the reservation in earlier days: "... times when it would have taken four days to walk the length of this reservation" (191) and is troubled by its shrinking land holdings. When Nanapush and his family falls behind schedule in paying the annual fee for their land, the priest, Father Damien, suggests that they collect barks of the Mishkeegamin shrub and supply it to the Pinkham tonic

dealer for quick money. Just as Nanapush and his family get exploited by the white civilization, they in turn are coerced to deplete the natural resources of the woods by stripping off bark from the wild shrubs: "The thin pungent odor stuck to us, lodged in our clothes, and would be with us forever as the odor of both salvation and betrayal..." (176). On the other side of the spectrum, Bernadette Morrissey takes up an office job at the Agent's office, in order to save her land holdings, marking a complete assimilation into white culture. This marks the complete negation of her communal bonds as she "mailed debt announcements to every Indian in arrears" (179). Nanapush voices the importance of community in the lives of the Native Americans, that had sustained them so long: "... we old-time Indians were like this, long-thinking but in the last, forgiving, as we must live close together, as one people, share what we have in common..." (180). Finally, Nanapush loses his land and within a month, a Lazarres family acquires it. The elderly patriarch draws attention to the intra-tribal discord by citing the example of the degenerated Lazarres and the Morrisseys. He mentions the purloining habit of the Lazarres: "... all of them grown stout and greasy from the meat supplies that they had pilfered from their neighbors" (184). However, the Pillager cabin is taken over by a lumber company as taxes remain unpaid due to Margaret and Nector Kashpaw's betrayal. They had used the hard-earned money for the Kashpaw allotment only instead of saving both the Kashpaw land and the Pillager cabin. The loss of the ancestral property is concomitant with the ecological disaster that strikes Matchimanito: "It was the death road of the trees and all that lived in their shadows" (209). In an act of vengeance, Fleur saws through the base of the trees around her cabin and the tress crash on the lumberjacks and their wagons: "With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur's cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses" (223). This is almost a juxtaposition of Fleur and Mother Nature, venting their wrath on the raiders of indigenous land. Erdrich reverses the expected course of events—instead of the lumberers felling the trees, catastrophy is unleased on the men by the tall trees of the wood.

Fleur's cabin beside Matchimanito Lake has pivotal significance in the course of the dual narratives. It is the last piece of property that Nanapush and his surogate daughter, Fleur, lose to the prospering white logging business. Suzanne Lundquist terms it a "sacred space" (Lunquist 215).In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. further draws an analogy between land and religiosity:

> ... it is to the lands on which the people reside and in which the religions arise that is important. This possibility is what has dominated the concerns of American Indian's peoples from the very beginnings. The chance that lands would be lost meant that religious communities would be destroyed and individual identities forsaken (Lunquist 216).

Regarded from this viewpoint, Fleur's cabin may be termed as a representation of what Edward Soja termed as the 'Thirdspace', drawing from the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia in conjunction with Henri Lefebvre's spatial trialectics. Soja combined and modified the Firstspace perspective, dealing with the "'real', material world" (*Thirdspace* 6) and the Secondspace perspective that presents reality through "'imagined' representations of spatiality" (*Thirdspace* 6) to put forth his concept of Thirdspace as:

> *Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (*Thirdspace* 56-7).

The cabin by the lake becomes the lived-in space as well as the repository of Native American traditions, heritage, legend and myth. Erdrich further explicates about this place in her interspersed novel belonging to the same Dakota cycle, *The Bingo Palace* (1994), in which the protagonist, Lipsha Morrissey, visits Fleur at Matchimanito cabin: "It is a spirit place, good if you are good and bad if you have done bad things..." (*The Bingo Palace* 132). The Pillager cabin is at once a literal and a metaphoric cultural repository, "Pillager land was no ordinary land to buy and sell" (175); it encapsulates Soja's Thirdspace, "the fully *lived space*...locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (*Postmetropolis* 11).

Erdrich uses the metaphor of the hinge to describe Fleur's shamanistic power and her ability to straddle both worlds of the temporal and the supernatural. Pauline describes Fleur's proximity to the water monster: "She was the one who closed the door or swung it open. Between the people and the gold-eyed creature in the lake... Fleur was the hinge" (139). Pauline intensely desires to be a similar gateway between her people and Catholicism. It is illuminating to recall Bachelard's elucidation on doors in *The Poetics of Space*: "For the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open. In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings" (Bachelard 222). Pauline's ardent desire to acquire the role of a liberating saint is aptly expressed here through the semiotic signifier of a door-hinge. Her intense wish, almost bordering on a kind of lunacy, represents what Bachelard terms a daydream, leading her to live in a make-believe world where she equates her self-inflicted sufferings with the passion of Christ.

Furthermore, Fleur's connection with the spirit world is conveyed when she undertakes a journey to the 'other' world in order to save the life of her second child. However, on realizing that her elder child, Lulu's life is also at stake, Fleur wins the life of the latter in a gamble. The gamble is a recreation of the one which had been played at the butcher shop in Argus before, the only difference being that mortality is at stake now. The spirit world is located in the western direction, which is the Native American direction of death. This world is conceived as an idyllic space of the American Indians, as conveyed in Pauline's description: "We passed dark and vast seas of moving buffalo and not one torn field, but only earth, as it was before....There were no fences, no poles, no lines, no tracks" (159). As opposed to the reservation, in which Nanapush had "guided the last buffalo hunt" (2), the animals are found aplenty in the 'Other' world. Erdrich subverts the devastated conditions of the reservation whereby the land in the spirit world is depicted as being unravaged, devoid of the stiffling and restricted area of their lived world where landholdings get diminished day by day. As Tuan elaborated: "The construction of a mythical realm satisfies... psychological needs; it ... explains events" (Tuan 92). In corollary, the visit to the spirit world justifies Fleur coming to terms with her child's death and the novelist's nostalgic representation of a utopian American Indian reservation in the days of yore. The latter viewpoint may be read in conjunction with Soja's 'Secondspace' perspective of representing reality through "'imagined' representations of spatiality" (*Thirdspace* 6).

The diminished American Indian land holdings are most succinctly depicted in the map that Father Damien procures, which shows the land lost and the ones held. The lands that the tribes had lost are painted "a pale and rotten pink" (173). Nanapush laments "... the lapping pink, the color of the skin of lumberjacks and bankers, the land we would never walk or hunt, from which our children would be barred" (174). Maps become "the concrete emblem of colonization and loss" (Hafen 326). In this context one cannot help but recall the General Allotment/ Dawes Act of 1887: "The central idea of this act was the assimilation of Indian

cultures into the white culture by means of individualization” (Wiget 158). This process comprised land allottment to Indian individuals/families. However as a result, much of the land ended up in white custody either through “sale of surplus lands, alienation to whites through fee patents, and the sale of original and heirship allottments” (Wiget 159). Additionally, the allotted land became fragmented with the emergence of both White and Native American land-holders.

The downward spiralling of the clan is synecdochically expressed in Nanapush’s description of the Morrissey farm: “The windows were broken out with planks and dirty oiled paper hung in their place. Garbage, the snapped bones of muskrats, crushed cans and splinters of crates were littered in the crusted snow.... The will to plant and harvest deserted them” (182). The degradation of the Morriseys, their carnal desires and their alienation from traditional ways of life have led them to lose what the Pulitzer winning Native American novelist N. Scott Momaday termed the “sense of place” (Bloom 5). Momaday explicates: “A sense of place derives from the perception of a culturally imposed symbolic order on a particular physical topography” (5). Erdrich juxtaposes the Morrissey farm with Fleur’s Matchimanito cabin to contrast respectively the distance and the proximity of the two home-spaces from the cultural lineage of the American Indians. The betrayal of Fleur by Margaret and Nector, who save only their own homeland, reveals individual self-centredness triumphing over community values, which have been an ingrained part of the Native cultural ethos.

Finally, the space occupied by the boarding school which Lulu attends has been invested with a subversive function in the “most overtly political of Erdrich’s works” (Owens 215). All American Indian children were made to attend off-reservation boarding schools, “in order to further individualize the Indian” (Wiget 162), in accordance to the Allotment Act. Fleur’s decision to send her daughter, Lulu, to the school is a “struggle to change power relations between her people and the voices of officialdom” (Adamson 110). Instead of abiding by the federal governmental policy for its stipulated objective, Fleur wants her daughter to effect change by being empowered with literacy and education, just like Nanapush. Dispelling Lulu’s misunderstanding of this objective is the sole purpose of Nanapush’s narrative.

Exploring the delineations and ramifications of land, place and space in *Tracks* reveals Erdrich’s effective performance of the task of ‘survivance’ that she had categorically explained in her essay, “Where I Ought To Be” (1985): “Contemporary Native American writers have... a task quite different from that of other writers.... In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (Lundquist 105).

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