

FLEUR PILLAGER: CHIPPEWA WOMAN OF POWER IN LOUISE

ERDRICH'S TRACKS

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ABSTRACT

Karen Louise Erdrich is acclaimed as one of the most significant Native American writers and a most accomplishing and promising novelist. Erdrich's skill in creating and developing fictional characters is a central aspect of her success as a versatile writer. Erdrich confronts the realities of Native American life in the Twentieth Century. Her fiction depicts the Anishinaabe culture in which present occurrences cannot be isolated from the past and her works often deal with the issues concerning Native Americans. Louise Erdrich is renowned for the portrayal of women characters, specifically as mothers and self made personalities. Her women project self confidence and stand in good stead for their community as a whole. Erdrich depicts Fleur Pillager as a self made woman who uses her powers and strengths absolutely to the fullest in order to stand tall as an individual and for her community at large.

KEYWORDS: *Power, Medicine Woman, Spell, Isolation, Fear, Identity, Revenge*

INTRODUCTION

Karen Louise Erdrich is noted for her universality in themes and her engaging authorial presence in her novels. Erdrich's thematic concerns such as abandonment, familial relationships, isolation, cultural bonds, search for identity, healing power, tribal community, motherhood, and balance between cultures, trickster, home coming, hope, and redemption are evident in her novels. Erdrich portrays the female characters quite opposite to the stereotype of clinging, submissive and self sacrificing women. Her women are depicted courageous, intelligent and independent of judgement. One such powerful and fearful female character created by Louise Erdrich is Fleur Pillager in her novel, *Tracks*. Fleur Pillager is known as a medicine woman, the wife of Eli Kashpaw, the mother of Lulu Nanapush, the wife of John James Mauser and the mother of John James Mauser II.

Fleur's father is a Pillager, her mother is the Boss woman and she has three younger siblings. At a very young age of seventeen, Fleur loses her parents and siblings in an epidemic. The Pillagers are people of power with the smile of a wolf and the clan markers on their graves are four crosshatched bears and a marten' (Tr5), who 'knew the secret ways to cure or kill'(Tr2). They are respected and feared by everyone in the reservation. Fleur Pillager reflects the role of bears in the medicine society as well as the Chippewa society. Fleur Pillager is most closely associated with the power of the Bear Spirit

"She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. One can know this for sure because the next morning in the snow or dust, one can follow the tracks of her bare feet

and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. "(Erdrich1988:12).

Fleur as a child of fifteen seemingly drowns in the lake, but unfortunately she drowns the rescuers and they die instead of her. As a girl, Fleur nearly drowns twice, and on both episodes, according to local legend, she causes "the men who either did or did not rescue her to take their place in the world of the dead "(Tr10-11). Paradoxically, when they try to save her, they die in an inexplicable ways as if Fleur were the hidden cause of their death. Later on, when she drowns for the second time and is thrown by the waves to the shore of the lake, another man, Many Woman, looks at her, closely examining whether or not Fleur is alive. Suddenly, her eyes, 'spun open, clear black agate, and she looks at him,' cursing him' you take my place' (Tr11). People grow afraid of Fleur more and more when they learn that Many Woman has started to avoid the lake and water as much as possible. Later he finds his death in the new bathtub when he 'slipped, got knocked out and breathed the water while his wife stood in the other room frying breakfast'(Tr11).No one dares to make Fleur furious as they are afraid of her power to curse or kill people.

Eli Kashpaw, her lover, who is the first one to regain consciousness, starts running towards the lake, trying to save Fleur. Eli manages to get Fleur on the shore where she, furious and angry, puts a curse not on Eli, but on Nector when she utters "Nector will take my place!"(Tr213). Before she says these words, the "ground beneath [them] was trembling"(Tr213). It seems as if the water monster, Misshepesu, is protecting Fleur and does not allow her to drown but only abducts her for a few minutes and then releases her back to the real world. She is considered as a witch who has inexplicable powers and the ability to rise from the bottom of the lake.

Fleur Pillager is an exemplification of traditional Chippewa power, and she owes her power to her spirit guardian, Misshepesu, the water spirit man. Pauline notes the power of Fleur and says, "Power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth. It comes down through the hands, which in the Pillagers are strong and knotted, big, spidery and rough, with sensitive fingertips good at dealing cards. It comes through the eyes; too, belligerent, darkest brown the eyes of those in the bear clan, impolite as they gaze directly at a person." (Tr31).

Fleur's adherence to the Ojibwa customs is not solely because of her relationship with Misshepesu, as she is also guided by people who heartily embraced traditional customs. Fleur is a powerful medicine woman whose bear power enables her to perform wonderful cures. She is a community elder for having served many in the reservation as a midwife. Her healing powers are used for the common good. Men fear Fleur because early in her life, every man she came into contact with would die. Erdrich depicts the magical power of Native American women through the character Fleur.

Fleur Pillager represents a strong figure with an abundance of power and abilities. Fleur 'was wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan'(Tr3) she is aware of her feminine beauty and the ability to attract men. Above all, she is also considered a passionate woman due to the fact that "men made brainless fools out of themselves following. They adored her and feared her in equal measure"(FS72).This constant adoration of Fleur causes much gossip among the women in her community as they perceive Fleur as a witch who draws men away and either curses them or kills them.

Fleur's powers are not only gained through her ancestors but also through her guardians. She lives in the woods near by the Matchimanito Lake which is believed to be the home of a water monster. Fleur has invisible connection to the lake and she has power over the monster because she 'kept the lake thing controlled'(Tr35). Her relationship with the most powerful water spirit is a major strength for her survival.

Fleur experiences a lot of odds in her life. The death of her family deprived her of a mentor to guide her in harnessing the powers for good. She is sexually abused by the white men while working in Argus making her furious. She initially isolates herself in the woods and manipulates her powers to fear people. In the process she becomes confident. This confidence runs through every endeavour she undertakes and it also paves a way to be victorious.

Early in the novel *Tracks*, Fleur works at Pete Kozka's meat store in Argus. She is an expert at playing cards and gained mastery over men in playing cards and evinces remarkable power. Pauline says that 'Women didn't usually play with men, so the evening that Fleur drew a chair to the men's table there was a shock of surprise'(Tr18). Fleur is skill and dexterity in playing cards, alerted men. One day Fleur plays the poker with three men namely, Lily Veddar, Tor Grunewald and Dutch James. Fleur wins dollar after dollar gaining an edge over other men who played with her. They lose their money to Fleur and turns revengeful. In a fit of frustration they abuse her sexually in the smokehouse. As a consequence she displays supernatural power to spite them.

The next day, Fleur through her magical powers, creates a powerful wind that leaves most of the town intact, yet destroying the meat shop where the three men who raped her are frozen to death in the icehouse while seeking shelter from the storm. This incidence though painful makes Fleur to muster up courage to revenge them. Fleur is most popular for her immense strength and confidence in the community and no man would dare go to her. She seduces men through her charm and cares very little for them. Fleur either casts these men aside or takes away their lives. She shows no concern to men. Fleur does not reveal her ordeal in Argus. It is through Pauline Puyat, Fleur's rival that people learn about the rape and Fleur's power to destroy those men. The state of not acknowledging the rapes vouches for her mental strength and power. Thus she creates a niche for herself.

Fleur lives alone in the deep woods, "surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts" (Tr2) yet she manages to take care of herself well with the money she won in Argus. Apart from that Fleur is an excellent hunter. It is not the hunting prowess that is significant but the way she conducts her hunting. The act of hunting is a masculine act which portrays Fleur's strength. With the ability of her powers Fleur's footsteps gradually change from human to animal especially bear. Vecsey points out that Fleur is what the Anishinaabe call a bear walker, one of the most feared type of shamans.

Fleur's relationship with Eli Kashpaw was an accident. She knows that she is responsible for keeping the land and with it, the Chippewa heritage. The power Fleur gets from keeping her land also enables her to marry Eli Kashpaw and become a mother to Lulu. When Fleur gives birth to Lulu, she almost dies at childbirth, but is assisted by Eli's mother Margaret Kashpaw. The baby Lulu's arrival makes Fleur happy especially when she finds in her, the resemblance and continuation of a clan. Pauline Puyat says that Fleur comes to teach Lulu many words in a very short time that the child "kept up a constant and annoying string of song and talk which the others laughed at and indulged"(Tr76). Fleur mothering and nurturing her child in the best way instigates Pauline Puyat's jealous. Fleur's dress sense for the child is evident in the novel. As for her green dress it is "cinched around her stomach with a leather belt"(Tr76). These illustrations demonstrate the care and concern for her little child, thus creating a space for herself as a 'loving mother'.

Fleur is eager to teach her child the Chippewa language and heritage like the mothers of the Chippewa tradition. Fleur feels proud of her child who is raised in the Pillagers land and who is surrounded by the great love of the extended family. Lulu's presence in the life of her mother in particular and the other members of the family like Eli Kashpaw her

father, Nanapush and Margaret her grandparents and Nector transforms the relationships among these members themselves. Margaret who initially refuses to accept Fleur as her daughter-in-law comes to live with her in the later years. Lulu makes these people feel like "a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some religious in the old way and some in the new"(Tr70).Fleur with all her amiable qualities wins the hearts of her people.

Fleur protects her land for a while with the Argus money she earned by paying the fees on all her Pillager land allotments but as the years rolled by she had to pay more. It was difficult for her as she was passing through bad times. Fleur, Eli, Lulu, Nanapush, Margaret all live together making the best out of their living through love and family bonding.

Eli Kashpaw loves Fleur that he constantly returns to Fleur to gain her love though she refuses to even let him touch her. Margaret is attacked by Clarence Morrissey and Boy Lazarre who tonsured as an act of solidarity, Fleur does the same for herself which projects her as an affectionate daughter-in-law. Fleur conceives for the second child for Eli but unfortunately goes into premature labour with no help of any kind. She loses her second baby and was emaciated both physically and spiritually. The family almost starves surviving only with the rations from the government. After the loss of the child, Fleur's power wanes. This weakness does not shatter her in anyway rather she works hard with the rest of her family to save the Pillagers and the Kashpaws' from taxes. Incidence of such a kind stands to establish that Fleur is successful in creating a space for her own.

When Fleur learns that she has lost her land to a logging company, she devices a strategy that would permit her to alchemize her suffering to comic possibility and ironic perception. She will have the last ironic laugh. If her beloved trees must fall, she will not let them be filled by white men's hands. During the months that mark the logging company's march of destruction through the forest towards her cabin, Fleur uses a stolen axe and a stolen saw to cut almost, but not completely, though the bases of the last remaining stand of trees surrounding her cabin. When the loggers finally arrive at her doorstep, she is ready for them. Fleur has alchemized her suffering towards an act of defiance that will give her the strength she will need to transcend the sorrow of her loss. Through Fleur, Erdrich epitomises her power to ridicule fate and transcend her sorrow.

Fleur feels that loss of land leads to loss of traditional values and the sense of belongingness. Fleur who does not want to be a loser, curses not only those who saved her from drowning but also the "lumber bankers and officials in their nests and curse the Morrisseys. But never Nanapush"(Tr214) whom she considers as her father. A strong sense of sorrow and presentiments drive Nanapush to Fleur's cabin. As he sees the remains- the square mile of towering Oaks, a circle around Fleur's cabin. She stands at the front door engulfed by logging men and wagons awaiting signals to fill the last of the trees. Nanapush expects Fleur to be sad and sorrowful but to his surprise her face was bright with excitement and amusement. She was drawing silent strength, very poised, glancing into the sky and shutting her eyes allowing peace within. As trees fell she based her teeth in a wide smile and frightened even those who did not understand the smile of the Pillagers. The remaining trees are toppled: " A final gust of wind topples the remaining trees, and they fall away from her cabin." in a circle pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses...Twigs formed webs of wood, canopies laced over groans and struggles. Then the wind settled, curled back into the clouds, moved on (Erdrich223) Nanapush and Fleur shocked to the utmost stands together in a landscape level to the lake and to the road.(Erdrich 223). Fleur rejects the suggestion made by Nanapush to stay with the tribe. She boards the cast with no possession except the weeds and sets alone. No force is strong and powerful to restore the desecrated land but through her ironic act of defiance, Fleur has

mustered up the strength and will to survive.

Fleur draws her power from ancient Chippewa spirits, medicines her charms and her sexuality as well. Fleur is mysterious, confident and beautiful woman. A sense of wonder stems from Fleur's power to live even after being drowned three times, her transformation into a bear, and her non-conformist attitude. These difficulties in Fleur's life does not make her lose her power or identity rather makes Fleur more strong and powerful.

CONCLUSIONS

Fleur Pillager seen gaining power, strength and identity by acknowledging the power of the ancestral spirits and her heritage that influenced her. When Fleur realises her identity, her inner and physical strength, acknowledges the impact her ancestors made the reverence for culture and heritage are essential to her life to make it a whole. She is endowed with magical touch, magical spells, magical spirit that connects her to the universe and helps her to find an identity. To be precise Fleur's disappearance and tracklessness at the end of the novel *Tracks* function as a present absence for her absence becomes a haunting presence in the novel.

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