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The Intersection Between Environmental Degradation and Sexual Violence in *The Round House*

Many of Louise Erdrich's novels (such as *Tracks* and *Four Souls*) have focused on environmental degradation as a result of colonialism, specifically, the dispossession and allotment system brought about by acts such as The General Allotment Act of 1887 (Fitzgerald 45-7, Meyer 368-9). Erdrich's novel, *The Round House*, focuses primarily on the issue of sexual violence on Native American reservations as a result of jurisdictional issues brought about through precedents set by cases such as *Oliphant v. Suquamish*, which took away the right of Native Americans to try Non-Indians (Erdrich 229). However, *The Round House* also ventures into the issue of environmental degradation at the hands of colonialism in Mooshum's dream story, analysis of which, reveals connections to the rest of the novel, as well as, to Erdrich's previous novels. Through these connections, *The Round House* illustrates how interconnected tribal issues are, particularly, the issues of environmental degradation and sexual violence.

Mooshum's dream story is an integral part of the novel because it partially serves as the inspiration for Joe's decision to kill Geraldine's rapist. In *The Round House*, Joe's mother, Geraldine, is raped, and her rapist, Lark, is ultimately released because jurisdictional issues make it impossible to take the case to court and prosecute Lark. As a result, Joe eventually seeks justice for his mother by murdering Lark. In Mooshum's dream story, Nanapush's mother, Akiikwe, is accused of being a wiindigoo, and therefore, she must be killed by a blood relative. It is decided that Nanapush must kill Aki; However, Nanapush fights back against his tribe to

defend and protect his mother. Nanapush, through his mother's instruction and help, then goes on a journey to find the Old Buffalo Woman.

Strong parallels are drawn between Geraldine and Joe and Akiikwe and Nanapush, which not only ties *The Round House* and Mooshum's dream story together, but also *The Round House* and some of Erdrich's other novels together. Although deforestation is not touched upon in Mooshum's dream story, deforestation is a major issue in Erdrich's novel *Tracks* which features Nanapush (Fitzgerald 60). In *Tracks*, Nanapush claims that he saw the "last buffalo hunt," the "last bear shot," and captured "the last beaver" (Fitzgerald 55). This is consistent with Mooshum's dream story when the Anishinaabeg are struggling to find food and even when they go off their borders (Erdrich 180). These extinctions are attributed to the fur trade, westward expansion, reservations, and allotment (Fitzgerald 55). For added context, The General Allotment Act of 1887 divided up reservations into privately owned parcels of land, as well as, left some land for white people to settle on (Meyer 368-9). The reservation system was designed to transition Native Americans out of their own cultures and into the capitalistic culture of colonists (Meyer 368). It is this capitalistic spirit imposed on the land that resulted in severe ecological damage. At one point in history, a large area of pine trees had been ceded from local Native Americans and handed off to lumber companies to deforest (Meyer 381-2). This resulted in devastating effects on the Anishinaabeg because the lumber companies built dams that flooded areas containing crucial resources including crops, and sediment erosion from clear-cutting forests resulted in severe water pollution that killed aquatic life (Meyer 382). This is an example of how connected the environment is and how damage to the environment results in damage to Native Americans. The idea that the environment is interconnected is consistent with the traditional Anishinaabe perception of the environment and ecology. Traditionally, the Anishinaabe serve as environmental stewards because they recognize themselves as being part of

the environment, and therefore, their survival hinges on protecting the environment and their relationship with all aspects of the environment (Fitzgerald 11).

Tracks and Mooshum's dream story are both examples of "land narratives". Stephanie J. Fitzgerald defines a "land narrative" as stories rooted in the idea that "land itself has its own story" rooted in Native American creationism "which is embedded in and retold in every subsequent Native narrative" (15-6). These narratives contain indigenous knowledge and geographical and biological features of the land (Fitzgerald 16). Fitzgerald's book, *Native Women and Land: Narrative of Dispossession and Resurgence*, analyzes contemporary Native women's land narratives as a response to dispossession and allotment (16).

Mooshum's dream story is rooted in a long tradition of the Anishinaabe's relationship to nature and environmental stewardship that protects the land. Fitzgerald presents two Anishinaabe creation stories that bear a striking resemblance to Mooshum's story (16-7). Like Mooshum's dream story, these two creation stories depict a cooperative relationship between native people, the land, and the animals (Fitzgerald 17). Traditionally, the Anishinaabe tell stories to emphasize their connection to nature by focusing on what both the animals and humans do, as well as, depict women as leaders in environmental restoration (Fitzgerald 18). In the creation stories, Sky Woman cooperates with the turtle, muskrat, and other animals to respond to environmental issues (Fitzgerald 16-7). In a similar manner, Akiikwe (or Earth Woman) and her son cooperate with fish, rabbits, and Buffalo to save their tribe from starvation. Another striking resemblance between these creation stories and Mooshum's dream story is the central role women take in these stories in addition to their strong ties to nature as evident in their names. Native Americans often reflect their relationship to nature by preceding their human title ("woman" in these cases) with an element of nature ("earth" and "sky" in these cases) (Harvey 206).

The term “ecofeminism” according to Davion refers to the idea that it is the same ideology that leads to oppression of women and environmental degradation: “Ecofeminists argue that any environmental ethic that fails to recognize important conceptual ties between the domination of women and the domination of nature cannot provide an adequate understanding of either” (qtd. In Mallory 13). Many ecofeminists attribute this ideology to capitalism, one of the driving factors in the reservation system and the deforestation of native land (Mallory 20). The concept of ecofeminism and the idea that women serve as leaders in protecting the environment intimately creates a strong connection between women and the environment that will be relevant in analysis of Mooshum’s dream story and the rest of *The Round House*.

Mooshum establishes right away in his story that Akii has always been able to feed her children until the year they were forced within a reservation, setting up that it was the interference of white people that caused the Anishinaabeg to starve (Erdrich 179). As a result of having limited hunting ground, the Anishinaabeg are forced to deplete their territory of food (Erdrich 180). The Anishinaabeg’s reliance on nature for survival is demonstrated when Akii catches a fish that tells her: “My people are going to sleep now and you shall starve” (Erdrich 180). Cooperation between humans and fish is demonstrated when Akii speaks to another fish that provide her with the buffalo song that ultimately saves the Anishinaabeg (Erdrich 182). The fish ultimately provides Akii with the hunting song so that they can bring back the buffalo, which the fish rely on for bugs (Erdrich 182). So far, the story presents a mutually beneficial scenario where the fish rely on the humans to bring the buffalo back, the humans rely on the fish to find the buffalo, and as a result, the fish have more bugs to eat, and the humans will have buffalo and more fish to eat. This scenario is expanded to include rabbits when Akii turns to the rabbits for help to find out where the buffalo went (Erdrich 182). The rabbits will likewise benefit from the humans bringing the buffalo back because as the rabbit explains: “The buffalo

used to churn up the earth so the grass would grow better for the rabbits to eat” (Erdrich 182). Additionally, the rabbit includes all animals into the equation with this statement: “All the animals miss the buffalo, but they miss the real Anishinaabeg too” (Erdrich 182). That statement not only establishes a connection among all animals in the environment, but it also includes humans as being part of the ecology as well.

The Anishinaabeg’s attitude towards the environment is strongly contrasted with the white colonialists in Nanapush’s quest for the Buffalo Woman. While the Anishinaabeg demonstrate preservation, the white colonialists demonstrate waste and excess. Nanapush mentions how the white people would eat ten ducks for dinner while the Anishinaabeg starved (Erdrich 184). Furthermore, Nanapush mentions how white people have been seen shooting and killing Buffalo off of railway tracks and leaving the corpses to rot (Erdrich 185). Therefore, although no one knows for sure, it is established that white people are very likely responsible for the disappearance of the Buffalo through their wasteful killing of the animal, and therefore, responsible for the ecological damage caused by their disappearance. Meanwhile, Nanapush is able to kill a single buffalo and feed his entire tribe.

The Buffalo Woman prompts the creation of the round house, and therefore, serves as the tie between the environment and women. The Buffalo Woman further emphasizes the Anishinaabeg’s responsible relationship to the buffalo when she explains that were laws, ecological rules to follow in order to preserve the buffalo, and alludes to a better time before colonialists came and took away the Anishinaabeg’s ability to follow tradition: “Your people were brought together by the buffalo once. You knew how to hunt and use us. Your clans gave you laws. You had many rules by which you operated. Rules that respected us and forced you to work together” (Erdrich 214). The Buffalo Woman declares that the round house should be built as a symbol of good justice and that it will be not only representative of the body of the Buffalo

Woman, but also, the body of Akii (Erdrich 187, 214-5). Here the Buffalo Woman and Akii are tied together, and likewise, Geraldine is tied to both Akii and The Buffalo Woman. Furthermore, Akiikwe, the Buffalo Woman, Geraldine, and the round house all take on a protective role which connects all these characters as the embodiment of each other.

Akiikwe establishes her protective role when she works hard to locate food for her children, seeks knowledge to guide Nanapush on his journey, and cuts Nanapush out of the Buffalo Woman. The Buffalo Woman establishes her protective role when she gives herself to Nanapush and the tribe as food, provides shelter from the storm for Nanapush, and prompts the creation of the round house. The round house establishes its protective role by being a literal shelter and by serving as place for the Ojibwe to practice their religion while it had been criminalized (Erdrich 59-60). Likewise, Geraldine protects Ojibwe culture by keeping track of each family's bloodline and locating lost Ojibwe children (Erdrich 149). Geraldine demonstrates that she is protective of her family when she references one of Mooshum's wiindigoo stories: "It's something Daddy told me. A story about a wiindigoo. Lark's trying to eat us, Joe. I won't let him, she said. I will be the one to stop him" (Erdrich 248). Geraldine is intent on being the one to stop Lark and protect her family.

Geraldine's role as Akiikwe, the Buffalo Woman, and the round house is further established through her close connection to nature. Geraldine is an expert gardener dedicated to the care of her garden before her attack in the round house (Erdrich 85-8). Erdrich takes time to detail all of the many flowers and other plants in Geraldine's garden (85-6). When Geraldine finds out about the native American child being adopted, there is strong natural imagery associated with her: "groping forward in her flowered cotton gown...She began to retch. Her puke was a startling bright green" (Erdrich 158). Likewise, when Joe visits the round house he places emphasis on the grass and how overgrown it is: "The grass had not been mowed yet...The

log hexagon was set up on top of a slight rise, and surrounded by rich grass, vivid green, long and thick...The grass was already growing through the cracks between the boards” (Erdrich 59). when Geraldine arrives to meet Mayla at the round house she describes the lot as “weedy,” further placing emphasis on how the rest of nature is embedding itself within the round house (Erdrich 159). The lack of maintenance of nature at the round house is reflected in Geraldine’s neglect of her own garden after her rape. The description of weeds and overgrowth at the round house correlates with Lark’s crimes against women as Geraldine’s garden suffers as a result of her rape.

Cheyfitz and Huhndorf describe Geraldine’s rape as “the very paradigm of ongoing colonial power and enacted through violence” (para. 16). Geraldine suffers as a result of colonial power. The Buffalo Woman tells Nanapush that the round house is “the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way” (Erdrich 214-5). Linden Lark violates the Buffalo Woman’s commandment when he commits serious crimes against two mothers in the round house. According to Lee Maracle, “violence to earth and violence to people are connected” (qtd. In Whyte 125). Whyte defines the Anishinaabe concept of collective continuance as “society’s capacity to self-determine how to adapt to change in ways that avoid reasonably preventable harms” and is a combination of three traditional concepts: “interdependent relationships”, “systems of responsibilities”, and “migration” (125, 131). The Anishinaabe’s right to self-determine was taken away by colonialists. By colonizing, dispossessing, and allotting Native American land, Colonialists took away Native American sovereignty over their land which leads to both environmental degradation and increased violence towards women. Limited tribal sovereignty puts the Anishinaabe at the mercy of the U.S federal government, and as a result, Geraldine does not get legal justice because of jurisdiction laws preventing the courts from trying Lark. The precedent set by *Oliphant v. Suquamish* sequestered justice for Native American

women by taking away the right for non-Indians to be tried by tribal courts (Erdrich 229).

Cheyfitz and Huhndorf describe the rape as “an assault on the community itself” due to the rape occurring in the round house, a significant cultural site (para. 16). Geraldine’s rape is, therefore, both literally a violation of women and symbolically a violation of the environment.

It becomes apparent that the round house itself is the central node that connects issues of sexual violence and environmental degradation through its strong associations with women and nature. In true ecofeminist fashion, the novel establishes through this strong connective web containing allusions to Erdrich’s other novels, Anishinaabe mythology, historical events, and strong symbolism, that women and nature are connected, and issues of sexual violence and environmental degradation afflicting Native American stem from a single source, colonialism. The round house embodies women and nature and becomes a symbol of the intersection between the two. An attack on one becomes an attack on the other. Just as the environment is interconnected, so are tribal issues. Although *The Round House* is primarily focused on issues surrounding sexual violence, Mooshum’s dream story weaves environmental issues and nature into the framework of the story to serve as the reminder that tribal issues are all connected and stem back to when colonialists took away tribal sovereignty over their land.

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