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**The Predicament and Ostracism of Native Americans in
Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife***

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The present paper focuses on 'the predicament and Ostracism' of Native Americans in Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*, in which the writer has attempted to explain the predicament of Native Americans and how they are ostracized from the so called 'Civilized World' after the European contact.

Louise Erdrich is a Native American writer who played paramount role as an ambassador and voice of Native Americans. She focused on perennial quest for the identity in terms of native culture, religion, traditions and heritage by retracing the history of Ojibwa community. In the novel *The Antelope Wife*, she uncovers and explores multiple layers of history, from pre-colonial contact to the present times, their journey from 'Home' to 'Homeless' and from owing lands to landless people searching for their place in the mainstream America. This novel clearly reflects that 'Life was Simple' (AW pg 18) for these 'Original inhabitants' before Europeans controlled all their possessions and their contact made it difficult for the Natives who were thrown, 'out of the good simple world...into complex rolling prairie'. (AW 28)

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The novel *The Antelope Wife* intermixes the stories of Rozin, Frank, Richard, Kalus and Sweetheart Calio, with the stories of their ancestors, which are filled with violence, and loss and grief in different degrees. The narration begins with a nineteenth century massacre in an Indian village. One of the narrators Scarton Roy, commits an atrocity during that massacre as he killed an old woman then saved the life of an infant who was being carried on the back by a dog, to emote an humanitarian act. He left his home along with his twenty-three year old son Augustus Roy, in search of the same Indian village to meet the family of that old woman he murdered to repent for his deeds. He says, “we are going to search out the people I wronged and give them cracker tin.” (AW pg 28). Roy feels burdened by the ferocious act he has done to innocent people and finally kills himself once they reached to that family but his son chooses to stay there. Events in the book from nineteenth century to the present times are blended with magic realism, folktales, old traditions and historical ties. Story is told by multiple narrators from the perspectives of humans and animals resulting in disjointed sequences of time, space and life. The treatment of characters is a metaphor that echoes Native Americans’ difficulty to oscillate between two cultures and religions time and again and scattered elements of life from reservation to urban areas.

To analyse the complexities in the lives of natives, there is a need to retrace their history, as rightly observed by Satya Mohanty in these words:

Cultural identity is not determined by the past but is continuously reconstructed as we work through the meaning of our personal and communal histories. Such revisiting of past and reconstructing of our identities is possible only through emotionally demanding collective reckoning with suppressed and buried memories. Especially, when these memories include experiences as horrible as enslavement or other forms of dehumanization.

Through these lines, Mohanty urges the need of history for the survival of native traditions and culture which proclaims their identity. Erdrich, throughout the novel makes imperative note to show the significance of history. Native American history is replete with transgression and excruciations done by Euro Americans, firstly by pushing them to reservations and then by reducing their numbers through by various means. When Europeans came to settle on the native land, rich in resources they compelled the natives to move to ‘reservations’ as in chapter *The Deer Husband*, Erdrich writes,

Get them off that land! Away from one another. Split apart those families just getting to know one another after boarding school. Relocation is the main reason fewer Indians now live on reservations than in cities----like Klaus, like her cousin Frank, like Rozin, and like Richard Whiteheart Beads.(AW 129)

Whites started new techniques to reduce the number of natives in country as they had created clashes within the tribes, bribed the leaders of the tribe, sent the youth to WW I and had distributed infected blankets and alcohol . In the chapter, *Answers*, Charles asked Asin, “ What were we”? “Before this” and Asin answered,

“what were we? We were warriors! The women too!” “We hunted and trapped for the fur companies. However, we understand they were trapping us the way we trapped animals. They were using their goods as bait. They used their rum to. Rum cut with pepper, water, Tabacco. One swig would make you crazy. We knew most of those traders were against us at heart, but of course we needed more territory to hunt animals. We fought our way out here from the east and encountered the powerful Bwaang. We fought hard and never would have beat them except the whites attacked them, too, from all sides. They were good warriors, those Bwaanag. We made a mistake not to band up with them to extinct the whiteman. Now like us they are forced to hide their eagle feathers.(AW 40-50)

Above lines reflect the order of life Natives were leading before colonization. Their profession was not ‘garbage disposal’ as Kalus and Richard are struck into but hunting. They were free to rove anywhere in the country as the land was all theirs’. White settler’s came with trade policies but then corrupted the minds of natives with the introduction of alcohol. They understood the policies where whites were trapping them and they are sad about their past and regret why didn’t they joined hands with other tribes to wash out the whites from their lands. On the one hand they had no resources to fought them and on the other hand they had no idea what is coming next to them,” we were just like those people, never knowing what the gods or the government is going to do us next” (AW 55) and they accepted that they were “lost” (AW 42) their land their liberty to perform their ceremonies, and their religious practices and act according to their own volition.

The reality of reservations in America is depicted by Erdrich in almost all her novels except *The Antelope Wife* where she has portrayed her characters in Urban settings. Their migration from reservation to city life throughout twentieth century is not a choice but a compulsion as they are aware of high rate of unemployment rates on reservation. Donald Fixico writes, in *The Urban Indian Experience in America* that two-thirds of American Indians now live away from reservations. Diasporic people who often make pan-Indian ties while at the same time maintain connections to the nascent communities. This novel reflects how the native characters dwelling in the cities are captured in complexities with their shift from traditional ways to modern ways of living.

In her novel *Tracks*, the characters, Fleur Pillager, Nanapush and Lulu, return to reservation to escape colonial pressures. Likewise the character of Lipsha Morrissey from the novel, *The Bingo Palace* returns home to be ‘healed’ from the atrocities of outside world. But here in this novel *The Antelope Wife* the characters choose to stay in urban life like Frank Shawano and Rozin make their homes in “Minneapolis” returning occasionally to reservation. This shows their resistance and assimilation in the mainstream American culture. The life of natives on reservation and outside it has been shown in the novel, along with the effects of pre-colonial and post-colonial juncture to present a picture of their state of mind in a new globalized world. The situation of all the characters in the novel can be examined through the words of Cecille, when she says:

We developed as a people over many thousands of years. Our culture. Our ways. Our adaptations. Then all of a sudden in one generation-----wham. Warm-speed acculturation. And now we are the

products of two cultures. Something happened in our family that cannot be explained by the culture we live in now. When our mothers tell the stories they heard from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, we listen and nod as if we think the stories are true. But we don't think they are true. We don't think they're historical facts. Our minds don't work the same as our ancestors' mind worked. Our minds sort fact from fiction. We think the stories are powerful, maybe, but metaphorical, merely. (AW 217)

The modernization of the world after White settlers' arrival and their clash with new culture has created a bewildered locus for the Native Americans. The characters though are living in urban areas, still want a connection with their 'native ways'. As earlier it was forced on them to act according to new 'civilized ways' and to give up their old ways, that generation was at first denied their cultural heritage as Rozin did in the novel but few of them like Cecille understand the need to cling to the traditions of their ancestors along with new ways of life.

Giizis and Noodin are twins and grandmothers to Cally and Deanna and mothers of Rozin, who are the guiding spirits of Native heritage and old traditions of Ojibwe. As they are also living in urban space, they are native by heart and soul who enjoy their native ways and are still connected to the roots. They do not feel the cleft in their identities because of new culture and religion around them as Rozin feels. At one point when Cally and Deanna were sick and medicines were useless, their grandmothers suggested to perform 'name ceremony' in which they have to name both the girls by their ancestors' names "the girls did not have traditional names. They did not have Ojibwe names. This always been a sore spot with everyone. One thing or another always intervened" (AW 202) but Rozin, the mother of the girls was reluctant to follow this practice. Giizis says, "History scared Rozin, but history is what her daughters want" (AW 260). Both the grandmothers know that Rozin is willingly avoiding to go to the history of her people as it was painful with all the sufferings resulted in damage but on the other hand her daughters, the new generation, want to get connected to their roots. They are reclaiming for their 'original identity' and rejecting the one which is perceived as their own by their parents just for the sake of survival in White society. The need to transfer the cultural heritage into urban arenas is one of the major concerns in the recent times. And after the Ojibwe name ceremony, both the girls gained their good health back. Erdrich through this incidence presents a picture in which she is warning her people to keep alive all the traditions to remain sane and to survive in White culture.

The novel is replete with the incidents where writer shows the predicament of natives staying in cities. It can also be scanned through the character of Klaus when he says, "It's hard to tell what tribe people are anymore, we're so mixed--- I've got a buffalo soldier in my own blood, I'm sure, and on the other side I am all Ojibwe". (AW 82) Like the writer, character Klaus is mixed blood but as she says, she loves to enjoy both the sides and she has a choice to go on either side she wants, her characters are ensnared between these two. Rather than painting their life with the color of choices, they are now pounded between the two and struggling to attain 'real self'. As Klaus himself says, "I

am just a city boy. ...slow, stark, confused. (AW 94) and then he relishes his old memories and says, “ we live there. We live there in the places where sky meets earth”. (AW 94) as he no longer lived in open woods like his ancestors but he has all the adoration for his native land and dispossession transported him in a different zone. Throughout the novel Erdrich shows the influence of color ‘White’ for instance, “White Flour”, “White Sugar” and “White Dog” and used it deliberately as a sharp instrument to show the unfair advantages of white settlers and to present the ‘Blackness of their hearts’.

By viewing history, Erdrich redefines, relocation, remaps the borders of Ojibwa culture where culture is constantly changing. She demonstrates how culture is crossing the boundaries and how flexible culture can be. The rituals and traditions of natives are hybridized as a colonial effect. The traditions that Native Americans carried into the city life, including the ceremony of tobacco, preparation of food, way of dressing, use of language reflects a deep sense of connection to old times and on the same time provides a measure of cultural adaption that denies the attempt of complete assimilation to a new culture. Even in the urban space, and after their banishment from their own land, when most of the characters are facing issues of their ‘identity’ few are trying to balance an Indian subjectivity which is dynamic and not fixed in historical past.

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