

Interconnectedness of Mind, Body and Nature in the Traditional Healing System of American Indians in Tracks by Louise Erdrich

Sayed Juwairiyya Mobein
PhD Student (English)
National University of Modern Languages
Islamabad, Pakistan
jiyaaa333@yahoo.com

Abstract— This paper explores the impact of the traditional healing system associated with Ojibwe tribal members through the excavation of implicit connectivity present among mind, body and nature. Different health issues encountered by the natives are, in fact, sites that provide insights to those factors that either stabilize or destabilize connectivity among mind, body and nature. Analytical handling of the discourse, thus, imparts logic to the significance of interrelatedness of these three components in traditional healing system. By interrogating the need for medicine man/woman in Ojibwe tribe and detecting the hypnotic and efficacious impact of songs, herbs and drums on the mind and body of patients, this research paper provides a comprehensive version of traditional healing system of Native Americans.

Keywords-component; Ojibwa tribe, mind-body connection, medicine man/woman, songs, drums, herbs

I. INTRODUCTION (*HEADING 1*)

Nature is a great source of Native American knowing and being. Magorah Maruyama (1978), an epistemologist, considers Native American epistemologies as highly mutualistic and oriented towards holistic and contextual processes. The worldviews of the indigenous peoples are shaped and refined by intimate connection with ecology. Indigenous peoples view harmony as a dynamic and multidimensional balancing of interrelationships in their ecologies (Cajate, 1986). Disturbance within these interrelationships creates disharmony, and balance is restored by applying appropriate actions and knowledge (Cajate, 1986). There seems to be some logic behind this. Nature in itself is a manifestation of order and symmetry, and the human beings who maintain this stability are equally rewarded by nature in multifarious forms; imparting harmony to the inner world of human beings.

Native Americans' emphasis on mind-body connection discards Descartes' (1985) notion of the dichotomy between the two. The separation between the two is the root cause of various illnesses. Descartes' (1985) undue stress on rational approach accounts for the division among human beings and, thus, spreads anarchy. Deliberating upon the nature of various illnesses, Candace Pert (2001) comments upon the presence of a certain psychosomatic component in all types of illnesses. Pert (2001) breaks down the word

psychosomatic into its parts, and it becomes 'psyche' meaning mind or soul and 'soma' meaning body. The connectivity existing between the molecules of our emotions and physiology is indispensable, as Candace Pert (2001) puts it. An effective communication between the two equals the well-being of an individual. Emotions are the connectors between mind and body, so the nourishment of positive emotions in connection with nature generates robust health. Candace Pert (2001) provides scientific basis for the study of emotions and her discovery of the 'opiate receptor' as the first molecule of the molecules of emotions found on the surface of cells strengthens her standpoint in the article. 'Ligands' are the second components of the molecules of emotions, according to Candace Pert (2001) that bind to their receptors. This fusion is natural and selective that binds together mind and body. Pert's (2001) discovery of 'opiate receptor' counterattacks the positivist claim of the supremacy of reason in all affairs.

Native American population has been used as a sample by Michael Fuchz and Rashid Bashshur (1975) in their research paper "Use of Traditional Medicine among Urban Native Americans". Both these researchers have investigated the relationship between the traditional and modern Anglo medicine by conducting interviews with 277 families. But 140 members could not be interviewed because of their oscillation between the urban locality and reservation. They were even afraid to admit the usage of herbs and asked the researchers to avoid mentioning their names in their research regarding such extensive use of traditional medicine by nearly all tribal members. This paper is not very comprehensive and insightful as it gives a sketchy view of the tribes by quantifying their responses but it does give the idea of the tribes living at urban localities; still not having relinquished their beliefs of traditional healing.

Various historians such as William Cronan (Changes in land, 1993), Wilbour R. Jacobs (Indians as Ecologists, 1980) and Christopher Versey (American Indian Environmental Religions 1980) have been alluded to by Lee Schweningen (1993) in her research paper "Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers". This paper includes debates on Native Americans and their affinity with nature. Their habitation had been among mountains and trees thereby nature is of utmost significance in the lives of Native Americans. The Native Americans propagate and advocate

harmony between nature and man. Momaday, a Native American writer, in his novel "House Made of Dawn" (1968) has depicted this issue in the form of a story. Lee (1993) has discussed the works by different American Indian writers like Momaday, Lyon and Leslie Marmon Silko; primary focus being on Silko. In Silko's novel "Ceremony", Toyo's, the main character, regeneration is linked with nature. Deterioration of wildlife at the hands of white men has also been a major issue in her novel. Toyo's quest is to restore what has been lost--mountains, lions, bears etc. A glimpse of the natural healing becomes visible when the researcher refers to the character's illness on being away from natural surroundings. Silko as a nature writer has been discussed well by Lee (1993) but there is more focus on Silko and comprehensive comparison, as is indicated by the title of the research paper, is missing. Also only one novel by Silko has been enunciated. The relatedness of this paper with my own research is evident from the fact the role that nature plays in Native American literature. Louise Erdrich's name has also been mentioned in the category of American Indian writers but no detail concerning her novels is given in the paper. This paper motivated me to probe further into the issue of medicine in Louise Erdrich's novels.

Michelle R. Hessler (1995) has, no doubt, touched upon the medicinal knowledge possessed by a few tribal members in the research paper titled "Catholic Nuns and Ojibwe Shamans---Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's Tracks" but the paper, in a specific sense, is more about the contrasting features between the two female characters and, in a general sense, more about the clash between Catholicism and Ojibwe traditions. There is a reference to healing ceremony conducted by Nanapush for enhancing Fleur's spirituality but indepth interpretation of this incident is not there. Michelle (1995) has elucidated the concept of "soul dualism" in Ojibwe belief system. According to Ojibwe mythology, each person possesses two souls. One is the "travelling soul" and the other is the "stationary soul". The dwelling place of stationary soul is in the heart while the travelling soul exists apart from the body and travels outside the body. This traveling soul constitutes the spiritual part of an individual. These slight references to the healing tradition highlight the need for further research to gain various insights into the specific American Indian community portrayed by Erdrich in Tracks.

My research question encompassing the indepth comprehension of the traditional medicine, the hallmark of the Native Americans' identity and its strong connectivity with the religious credence, is rooted in cultural studies. This methodological perspective which I am interested in has been well expounded by Raymond Williams (1961) as a term that can designate the whole way of life of a social group as it is structured by representation and power. Studying culture is not a detached domain, as Bourdieu (1984) maintains. Rosaldo (1997) inculcates the same notion by putting forward the impossibility of studying culture as an objectified thing or as a self-enclosed, coherent, patterned field of meaning. Cultural studies prefer "situatedness" (Hebdige, 1988) for the purpose of analysis and in that

particular situation identity is understood as a common property that differentiates a group (Massumi, 1992).

As all phenomena form a web showing connectivity so the application of one method does not seem to suffice here. The novel is in the form of a discourse so the discourse analysis will help in the construction of particular realities concerning my research question. Discourse analysis is defined as an approach to the analysis of language that looks at the patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur (Griffin, 2005). In other words, it analyses how worldviews get constructed through the usage of language. As my research is rooted in specific cultural practice, so without using ethnographic method the whole research will become detached; lacking involvement or engagement with the context.

II. MEDICINE MAN/WOMAN---A MEDIATOR

The whole cultural fabric of the Ojibwe tribe is interwoven with the concepts of medicine man/woman, interaction with nature/spirits and the resulting power of curing illnesses. The various fragments of the traditional practice of medicine together complete one cultural aspect of the Native Americans.

The novel Tracks by Louise Erdrich is unique and unusual in the sense that a totally new theme is embedded in the text that relates to the natural healing system connected with Native Americans. The concept of medicine man/woman that has got the power to heal up the individual remains prominent throughout the novel. In different societies various name tags specify individuals with such healing powers. The tag "medicine man/woman" in Ojibwe tribe connotes the spiritual bond for crossing bridges invisible to laymen and landing into the unknown realm that soon becomes the known realm. Carrying or keeping medicine bags is a distinctive feature of such healers. It can either be in the form of a handy pouch or a small store where a variety of plants are kept safe for curing diseases. The Native Americans appear as specialists in this regard. They keep on inheriting this "special touch" or the "special gift" from their ancestors.

Among the Ojibwe members, some characters in Tracks exhibit strange powers in recuperating ill ones. The two narrators in the story, Nanapush and Pauline, nail a lot about themselves and others. Whether it is Pauline who has been excommunicated by her community for renouncing tribal customs and entering Christian circle, or Nanapush, the stories by both contain certain instances of traditional concept of medicine. Fleur, the adopted child of Nanapush, maintains a plant storehouse which is often visited by her. When Pauline enters that plantstore, she gets confused to behold such a wide range of plants hanging and lying there. Everyone has his/her own way of storing plants. In contrast to Fleur, Barnadette, who belongs to the Morrissey family, uses labeled bottles for the easy consultation of plants kept within. Not the same plants are kept by every medicine man/woman as the storage depends upon the knowledge that he/she possesses with regard to plants. Nowadays people

gather plants not because of any inner significance but only for the sake of keeping up a hobby or to adorn the contours of their houses. It is not a mere past time or a hobby for the Native Americans. It is much more than that. Considering it a serious obligation, they resort to roaming around in woods in search of treasures in the form of roots, herbs and shrubs. Care is reflected through the bottles used by Bernadette and the purpose behind such care outshines the nominal care of a gardener. The contrast is vivid and without any mote of doubt. On the one hand, the medicine man/woman is seeking solace and peace for others, and on the other hand, the gardener tries to extort pleasure out of plants for his/her own sake.

The two male characters, Moses and Nanapush, are the medicine men that are often consulted by the Ojibwe members for efficacious results. They have the keys to the apparently fixed doors. Not all the tribal members are adept in tackling diseases and much experience is needed for conversion from a novice to an expert. Moses and Nanapush are the elderly figures who have imbibed much that has stretched their comprehension about plants. Why does Pauline rush towards Moses when she is desperate in her effort? What causes Eli to take refuge under the comforting asylum provided by Nanapush? There is something that the two medicine men possess which draws people automatically to them. This "something" is the special healing power.

No fixed rules for healing patients are to be observed in Ojibwe traditional medicine. A man/woman is subject to bringing about variations in his/her treatment according to the temperament of the patient and the nature of illness. In Tracks different pursuits are undertaken by the medicine men, Moses and Nanapush, and medicine woman, Fleur, which are as follows:

A. Through cure songs

How can the mental framework be understood being an abstract part of an individual? Is it easily accessible to the medicine man/woman or does it entail a long route to be taken? Ray Cattell (2006) discusses the striking differences between the concrete and the abstract worlds. Physical entity is visible to the naked eye as it has dimensions of length, breadth and height but abstract world, according to Ray Cattell (2006), is the dwelling place of emotions and thoughts and an outsider cannot easily reach this ethereal region. Why is the natural healing system slow to proceed? The reason lies in discerning the nature of emotions and these emotions affect the thinking strain as well. Quantifying emotions is the idea least encouraged in the traditional medicine. Plunging deep into the psychological functioning of an individual in a gradual fashion eradicates the root cause of the symptoms. The Native American healing system purifies the inner self which is not visible to an ordinary man as such. A medicine for external use only is of no use because the effects are temporary. The traditional healing system rests on this principle that the best way to cure a disease is to soothe the inner self first and then the physical frame automatically gets perfect.

How do songs facilitate transportation from the material to the emotional world? Do these provide any relief to the patient? Using songs for curing illness appears a novel idea to the modern individual. Musicality of the songs touches the emotional strain of the patient and he/she at once becomes engrossed in the happenings going on in the abstract side of his/her mind. The patient identifies himself/herself with the sad thematic tone of the song and the medicine woman/man observes the ebb and flow of emotions going inside while the patient is lost in the emotional world. Musical strains work as waves and the patient easily slips into the depth because of the deluge of waves. Patients are not always willing to disclose the emotional crises they are going through. Such is the overflow that changing expressions on patient's visage cannot remain hidden from the medicine man/woman. Songs leave a soothing effect on patient's health who gets transported to serene world through the medium of song. Songs carry with them hypnotic effects; providing alleys to the healer to get hold of the reason hidden behind the problematic version of the patient's physique.

Lulu's, Fleur's daughter, abnormal wild attitude is beyond everyone's comprehension. Nanapush finds her outside his door one day and brings her in. Instead of reacting negatively to her uncouth behavior, Nanapush smells the need for maintaining harmony in her mental state. Imbalance in mind gives birth to spasmodic behavior and Nanapush's intelligent use of cure songs assists him in restoring equilibrium in her mind. The dreamy world created by songs has overwhelming influence on the patient's mind who becomes oblivious of actual surroundings. Stress level gets reduced by this transportation from the actual to the dreamy world. Rhythmic melody lifts up the patient from the agonizing bed of pain and the airy region lightens up the patient's soul as well. Lulu, in a state of suspension, regains her vanished strength. Sparks of life inside her keep on gaining prominence under the magical effect of Nanapush's songs.

B. Through interpersonal skills

The patient comes to the medicine man/woman as a complicated case. The gathered mass of grievances in the patient's mind brings complications to his/her personality. How can the secret burdens be unburdened by the patient in an atmosphere which lacks cordial ties between the two individuals? Not everyone can be confided in and some people are hesitant in exposing their inner injured self. How can the truth behind grievances be elicited from the patient? The medicine man/woman can do this by employing his /her interpersonal skills. Knowing the art of conversation, he/she proceeds further to the second stage of empathizing with the patient. The patient feels at home seeing the medicine man/woman equally feeling the pain of the patient. Listening is a key factor in reducing gap between the doctor and patient. Attentive listening on the part of the doctor enhances his/her ethos or credibility. Step by step progression in gaining confidence of the patient guarantees disclosure on the part of the patient.

Estrangement between Eli and Fleur is unbearable for Nanapush as well. Being very well aware of the reason

behind this estrangement, Nanapush does not provoke Eli at the moment to go into the depth of the matter because of his outrageous reaction. Nanapush dexterously switches the ongoing conversation to another burning topic of the day, that is, negotiation going on between the Native Americans and colonizers on the issue of land. He takes Eli along with him on hunting expedition to divert his attention. Among natural objects Eli realizes his betrayal to Fleur and with a sense of relief on his realization he narrates the incident to Nanapush who does not interrupt him. On the other hand, there is the white doctor's treatment that annoys the tribal members at reservation. His impersonal attitude is reflected in his scientific or mechanical treatment; considering patients as objects. While examining Fleur's daughter Lulu, the white doctor does not feel the need for communication with her at all. Objectified medical treatment fails to reach the rootcause of the problem. Symptoms disappear but problem still remains.

III. NATURE AS HEALER

To the Native Americans, nature is religion. Being pagans they originally believed in the few basic elements – fire, earth, water and air; slightly different from the Chinese people who believe in fire, water, wood and metal. Different shapes and forms of nature are, in fact, various facets of supernatural spirits that are the governing forces of human lives. The utmost duty of human beings, according to Native Americans, is to keep nature spick and span, as it is sacred for them. Nature plays dual roles for them – nurse and destroyer. For pleasing gods and goddesses, man must have close ties with nature. Reduction of gap between human beings and nature sharpens human abilities to such an extent that they become supernatural mortal beings carrying the gifts of the immortal supernatural beings. Whosoever loves nature, gets ample in return. Vibrant hues sparkling in natural objects have their direct positive effect on human beings. There is a very strong healing power in nature that cannot be found in manmade artificial things. Tranquility in nature creates its own magical aura teaching the art of healing in its own language but it remains incomprehensible till the time recipient is all ears and ready to absorb it by establishing close relationship with nature. Nature, being inhabited by spirits, is invested with life and imparts patterning to the cultural mode of the Native Americans. Once relationship gets established, nature with all its powers enchants the human beings in such a way that they never get satiated.

What makes Moses one of the favorites of supernatural beings? He takes pains to comprehend the messages conveyed by spirits by staying in woods. His body mostly remains covered with leaves. This natural apparel made of leaves resuscitates him. Days and nights spent in the woods have changed him altogether. He sees what others are denied to see, he knows what others are yet unable to know and he listens to what others cannot perceive. Moses defeats the sickness by nestling in the lap of nature. Emollient effects of nature develop strong resistance in him against the diseases introduced by colonizers in their land. He combats unknown diseases with the unwonted powers.

Fleur in conjunction with nature manifests powers that raise her above the ordinary level. She is treated with veneration by the tribal members but Pauline remains busy with her incessant infernal endeavors to cast a slur upon Fleur's reputation. Stories concocted by Pauline spread like wild fire damaging Fleur's sanctity. Is she only destroying the image of Fleur? Does it not enrage the supernatural deities to have been challenged by a sinful, treacherous and vainglorious human being? Her jealousy for Fleur becomes obvious when the stories narrated by Pauline and Nanapush about Fleur are juxtaposed.

This is her side of the story but the actual side gets constructed by Nanapush. Spirits have gifted Fleur with marvelous powers enabling her to escape the devouring jaws of death. She survives and a certain halo surrounds her inducing fear in others. Nature takes care of those even who are affixed to it. Anyone who comes in the way and desecrates those ties is equally penalized by it. Mental perturbations have become an essential part of Pauline's life. On the contrary, nature keeps on saving Fleur every time the path of her life becomes precarious. Pauline advertently loses her tribal identity and leaves no stone unturned to melt her whole being into Christianity. Do supernatural beings react negatively as well to the rebellious tribal members? Through the character of Pauline the reaction of the deities in this regard gets unfolded.

Pauline is not the only digressed figure in the novel. Edgar Pukwan of the tribal police is reluctant to rescue the dying Pillager family living near Machimanito Lake. Nanapush takes initiative to provide succor to those sufferers of the family who are dying of the new disease called 'consumption', and by endangering his own precious life he saves Fleur. Not only does Edgar Pukwan hesitate in lending a helping hand but he also refuses to carry Fleur when Nanapush out of his own diminishing energy finds it difficult to move any further with Fleur. Edgar Pukwan's unwillingness in this regard is taken as an act of disobedience by the supernatural beings and he has to bear the consequences of his ultimate shameful act. The weakening of the ties between an individual and nature is not a venial sin in Native American cultural belief system. The more serious the crime, the worst the outcomes. Death creeps into Pukwan's bed and brutally cuts the thread of life present in him. Edgar, the foe of nature and nature lovers, experiences his final death journey while Fleur comes back from death to life by the warmth of Nanapush's love. Nanapush in return receives extra favors from nature and his communion with nature keeps on getting stronger with the passage of time.

Why is the burial process a significant feature in Ojibwe culture? Does it have anything to do with healing? Unlike Hindu cremation ceremony, deceased ones are buried by the Native American tribes. Burial relieves the pain of dead and they remain under the protection of nature spirits. This strengthens the idea that a tribal member whether alive or dead should be present amidst nature. The spirits of the dead ones achieve relief in connection with nature. Nanapush's mind remains haunted by fearful ideas as earlier he failed to bury the dead Pillagers. Even at the death bed, nature

functions directly as a healer. Nanapush realizes his religious obligation to bury the dead Pillagers and he takes the same route again with Pukwan's son. Leaving the corpses unburied at the same place would have never satisfied the spirits of Pillagers. The soft touch of the earth contains all the warmth and tenderness that is badly needed by everyone and that is at the same time rare to be found. Retaining such connection is a matter of survival and those who lose themselves in nature witness miracles not only around them but within themselves as well.

Fleur, Moses and Nanapush are envied by the rest of the tribal members for their herbal remedies. Moses has accumulated different kinds of rocks, barks and herbs for treating different ailments. Bloody coughing attacks on Fleur leave her enervated and languid. Problem in breathing sucks up all her courage. In desperate effort, she guides Pauline to her plant-store to fetch some "alder" from there. Who else can better diagnose the problem and prescribe an effective medicine than Fleur? She medicates herself and Pauline just acts as a channel. Later, Pauline is asked to fetch some "moss" along with certain leaves and roots as well so that bleeding may cease. All the ingredients are mixed well and boiled by Pauline. Pauline is cocksure of Fleur's imminent death despite the use of medicine by Fleur. Herbs, eventually, show their magic and start nurturing and strengthening Fleur by creating congenial atmosphere in her mind. With this renewed vigor, Fleur is once again the same.

Deeply moved by Fleur's diminishing health at another occasion, Nanapush prefers conjoint effort for combating disease and for this he asks for a favorable response from Moses. Together they prepare stew in a kettle and let it boil. In the meantime, Nanapush crushes the two plants "yarrow" and the other one he does not name. He spreads the paste on his arms up to the elbows and when the water boils in the drum he puts his hands in it. According to the tribal members, the sound of boiling attracts troubles and the presence of herbs on arms in the stew banishes and kills sorrows. This whole activity is accompanied by singing for curing illness more effectively. His burning arms pick up the slice of meat lying at the bottom of the drum and Fleur eats that. Pauline comes as a hurdle during that sacred activity but the medical pursuit overpowers her negativity.

Everyone is in dire need of medicine for several reasons. Pauline's unending jealousy for the growing affinity between Fleur and Eli numbs her power of rational thinking. Flooded by the emotions of jealousy, she visits Moses to find a cure for her unfulfilled desire. The burning fire of enmity reaches its height when Eli despises her wild advances. The herbal medicine provided to her by Moses fails to have any effect on her relationship with Eli because of the following reasons:

A. Her detachment from nature

She is no more a permanent part of the tribe as she is more inclined towards Christian religion. Her hatred for the

tribal norms takes her far away from the natural objects. Aspiring to become a perfect nun, she totally forgets the tracks of her forefathers and instead follows the footsteps of the colonizers. How can nature take responsibility for improving her mental state when she has lost her tribal identity? She gives least importance to conventional mode of tribe and becomes the living example of intense suffering.

B. Her wrong application of medicine

Love medicine given to her by Moses Pillager shows strong negative reaction when she uses it in a manner not prescribed by Moses. He gives her medicine so that the wall of animosity between Pauline and Eli may fall down. But Pauline out of rage mixes the herbal medicine in Eli's lunch and bids Sophie, who belongs to the Morrissey family, to take lunch for him. Both fall badly into the snare prepared by Pauline who lights up the insatiable lust for sex in them. She prolongs the session by the unfair use of medicine without taking pity on their deplorable plight. By getting involved in this hellish act she increases problems for herself. Worries still vex her. There was no need to drag Sophie in the scene but Pauline can do anything to mollify her unrestrained thirst for gaining prominence and torturing Eli. Moses gets to know what is going on in Pauline's mind through mesmerism. Which issue is perturbing her and why? He seeks answers to these questions and provides a better solution but Pauline's wrong use of medicine makes her nights more restive; full of nightmares.

IV. CONCLUSION

So, mind, body and nature are not considered separate entities in traditional healing system of Native Americans. Strong connectivity among them overshadows tragic aspects in the lives of Ojibwe members. The roles played by medicine men/women in regulating a healthy flow among the three components for infusing vitality in patients cannot be brushed aside in any way. The characters who attempt to bring about disconnectedness in such flow also foreground the importance of cohesive forces to be present among mind, body and nature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Candace Pert, "The Molecules of Emotion", Human Seminar, UBC, Spring, 2001
- [2] Ray Cattell, "An introduction to Mind, Body, Consciousness and Language", Continuum publishing Group, London, 2006
- [3] Michael Fuchz and Rashid Bashshur, "Use of traditional medicine among Urban Native Americans", Medical Care, vol. 13, Nov. 1975
- [4] Lee Schweninger, "Writing nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature writers", MELUS, vol. 18, Summer, 1993
- [5] Michelle R. Hessler, "Catholic nuns and Ojibwa shamans---Pauline and Fleur in Louise Erdrich's Tracks", Wicazo Sa Review, vol. 11, Spring, 1995.
- [6] Gabriele Griffin, "Research methods for English Studies", Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005