THE THREAD OF FATE IN THE ANTELOPE WIFE – A SYMBOLIC MESMERIZING OJIBWA BEADWORK

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Abstract: The present study aims at exploring the connections between beadwork as part of the Ojibwa culture and how it has been depicted in Louise Erdrich's novel entitled "The Antelope Wife", as part of an intricate system of symbols and metaphors highlighting the connection between destiny and the beads, each bead representing one's moment in life, a choice that leads to an end. Mystery lingers throughout the novel and the thread of symbols, deeply rooted in the Ojibwa culture, leads to the creation of a unique and intricate pattern of one's destiny.

Keywords: Ojibwa, beadwork, destiny, symbol, culture, connection.

Louise Erdrich's novel entitled *The Antelope Wife* seizes the readers' attention with its mesmerizing storytelling. "Native American tribes have stories passed down through the generations. These are also worked into designs they use that continue to tell their stories (...) Throughout the years, the creativity of Native Americans has been the ability to recognize beauty in nature and the culture of their heritage to express themselves" (HowExpert & Raye, 2022:2).

The novel delves into the symbolism of beadwork, a significant cultural element within the Ojibwa community and its deep implications for the characters' lives and destinities. "Native Americans who live by traditional beliefs hold that humans are an integral part of nature and should be in harmony with it. And if people want to learn how to live, they must carefully observe the rules and cycles of the natural world" (Monroe, Williamson & Stewart, 2007:X).

Each bead can be perceived as an important moment or choice in one's life having a great impact on the person's ultimate path. This concept of destiny, intricately woven through the narrative, adds depth to the symbolic system of the text.

Native American beadwork "has been in the process of development for over hundreds of years. (...) Shells, porcupine quills, and various materials the natural world provided were all incorporated into the early art we call Native American beadwork. Quills were cut and dyed and stitched to garments very early in their artwork. Glass beads replaced much of the use of quills because they were so much more durable and beautiful. However, many of the traditional patterns and symbols were then changed into the beadwork" (HowExpert & Raye, 2022:2).

Erdrich's masterful storytelling unweaves the symbolism of beadwork as a metaphor for interconnectedness. As the characters engage in the act of sewing with beads, a reflection of the interweaving relationships between them emerges. The individuality of each bead, with its unique color and shape, represents the distinctiveness of the characters. However, when these beads are threaded together, they create an impressive pattern, a cohesive whole, illustrating the communal bonds and shared experiences that shape their lives.

The delicate balance between individuality and collective identity forms a central theme within the novel, a theme which can be considered the stepping stone of a rather more complex theme, that is destiny. ”Like the post-apocaliptic sense of history articulated in Native American literature written in English, the senses of community are complex and multidimensional. Three dimensions that are particularly important are communal senses of identity, authorial sense of responsibility to the community and communal sense of authorship and literature reflected in the uses of oral traditions” (Porter & Roemer, 2005:11). While individuality, as a theme, along with community and naming are absolutely fascinating, they seem to be divided and in need of a more engulfing theme that the novel has so graciously provided us with. The beads serve as vessels of personal agency, yet they are also influenced by cosmic forces.

The characters in the novel engage in beadwork as a means of connecting with their ancestral heritage and spirituality. The beads, representing cosmic forces and ancestral wisdom, guide and influence the characters' paths. This interplay between personal choices and larger cosmic forces sheds light on the enigmatic nature of the greater theme, destiny, within the novel. ”The liberation from the American story of Indian demise must begin in the mind (...) Native people took possession of their own lives to envision a future of pride and flourishing. They would revisit their history and reimagine another destiny through story, through literature” (Teuton: 2018:1-2).

The beads, laden with individual stories and memories, serve as potent symbols of the interconnections that bring lives together. As characters manipulate these beads, they find themselves caught in a delicate dance weaving destinies together. This symbolism suggests that the actions and choices of one character can exert a powerful influence on the paths and fates of others, underscoring the mysterious workings of an intertwined universe. The beautiful pattern started with ”A necklace of blue beads [that] hung from the brow guard of the cradle board” (Erdrich, 2002:5) that transported a child on the back of a dog.

From the very first pages of this novel, we are given a very useful instrument that enables us, as readers, to become one with the pattern laid in front of us. It is true, beyond any doubt, that when immersed in something, anything really, such as a story, one cannot see the pattern that is woven. This particular pattern is the result of all the choices and actions one makes, or, why not, beads that retain all that we represent in a specific moment in time when we are at a crossroad, when we have to make a decision.

And still, one cannot make a future choice without pondering on the design that has already been formed by past actions and decisions. Every newly added bead is one that complements the others added on the string of life before. Also, it is made clear from the very beginning that the beads that are added to the pattern should be different in color, otherwise there will not be a pattern to speak of at all – the tireless effort of the Twins, of the Fates, ”each trying to set one more bead into the pattern than her sister, each trying to upset the balance of the world” (Erdrich, 2002:1) represents the duality that presides in the core of our very existence. Should this duality not exist, there would not be a choice to make to begin with, would it?

Lowering our gaze from the cosmic forces and into the world of men, we discover that the lines are blurred, at least for the Native American peoples, such as the Ojibwa. Elements of the previously mentioned forces are present in the mortal world: some are hidden in plain sight, such as the necklace of blue beads, others are more elusive such as the Antelope women themselves. Regardless of shape, appearance and substance, regardless of how they manifest in the mortal world, duality resides at their core as well, dividing and uniting at the same time, in an endless manifestation of power.

The very concept of ”Antelope wife” was created by a succession of choices, which the reader may overlook at first, being so deeply immersed in the novel. Amongst those

choices, the most important ones are those that have to do with beads: Roy's decision to follow the dog carrying the child, who then "slung the blue beads around the baby's neck" (Erdrich, 2002:6) only to be later on found by her mother, as if the beads themselves guided Blue Prairie Woman to her child. Another such example is the Ojibwa tradition of sewing beads in patterns, that is often mentioned throughout the novel in combination with twins, Zosie and Mary. This tradition further led to the original blue beads being sewn onto a blanket for a pregnant woman, beads which were, after a period of time, scattered.

Concerning the characters' destinies, Louise Erdrich succeeds in creating a spectacular pattern which is beautifully woven. We get conversant with subtle signs in the second half of the novel, signs that are meant to guide us towards another form of understanding one's destiny. It is neither the beginning nor the end that matters, but rather the pattern that is created. One such sign is the reference to Zosie's and the way she creates patterns: "A woman used to deception knows how to hide her stitches. Zosie's beadwork was tight and true. No visible beginning or end to the design. Impossible to find the starting knot, the final tie" (Erdrich, 2002:209). It seems that twins love to play with destiny itself and are unwilling to reveal their true identity and this, of course, is an impediment in the reader's attempt to make sense of the pattern that develops right in front of their eyes.

Erdrich does not wish to reveal the substance of her work, she does not want us to see the thread that binds the beads together, nor does she want us to see the beads on their own; rather, she wants us to see the entire pattern, the end result of her beautiful work. She wishes her readers to understand that the outcome itself is not that important, as the beads can be 'recycled' in new patterns.

Thus, Erdrich introduces circularity to her novel, concept that is represented by the very shape of the bead, concept that is meant to highlight even more the pattern into which we are all seen: "Maybe it's the colors of the seed beads that work up in stitches so intimate and small – collect, collect – until you have a pattern to the anguish. We dogs know what the women are really doing when they are beading. They are sewing us all into a pattern, into life beneath their hands. We are the beads on the waxed string, pricked up by their sharp needles. We are the tiny pieces of the huge design that they are making – the soul of the world" (Erdrich, 2002:83).

Within the realm of *The Antelope Wife*, beads meticulously sewn together follow intricate patterns, forming kaleidoscopic designs. These patterns reflect the very essence of life's grand design, hinting at a preordained course for destiny, governed by an elusive order. Through the act of sewing, characters become active participants, subtly shaping their own destinies while navigating the enigmatic currents of fate. The profound importance of choice and its role in shaping the pattern of one's soul can be found throughout the entire novel or, better said, represents the whole novel.

The word chosen for "bead" in an old language is mentioned in the novel. It is rich in meaning and it stands for an extremely important factor in understanding the novel as a whole: "The word for beads in the old language is manidominenz, little spirit seed ... The pattern of her daughter's wild soul is emerging. With each bead she plants in the swirl, Rozin adds one tiny grain" (Erdrich, 2002:91). Describing beads as "little spirit seeds" suggests that each and every bead represents a significant element of one's essence. These beads hold the potential for growth and transformation, contributing to the emergence of a unique soul pattern. Placing beads in a swirl or design becomes a symbolic representation of the choices one makes in life. Rozin is actively adding beads to the swirl. Through her actions, she participates in shaping her daughter's soul pattern. Each bead she plants represents a choice or decision that influences her daughter's evolving identity.

The delicate nature of the beads and the care taken to add them emphasize the importance of conscious decision-making and the impact of choices on personal growth. The

reference to the daughter's "wild soul" suggests the gradual emergence of her true nature and individuality. The word "wild" is meant to represent a sense of untamed authenticity and uniqueness. Using beads to portray this process signifies the importance of choices in shaping one's soul, allowing for the expression of innate spirit.

Furthermore, every spirit seed may represent the essence of an ancestor who has clearly influenced the destiny of the one whose soul is now being sewn. The term "wild" in association with "soul" is also duplicitous given that it has proven impossible to truly separate the descendants of Blue Prairie Woman. There will always be a certain *wildness* deeply rooted within their family line, which manifests in a way that is neither good nor bad: the wildness in Roy's actions from the very beginning of the novel – he attacks, then he saves - and also the wildness in Blue Prairie Woman's decision to abandon her twins in pursuit of her daughter. Those actions are neither good nor bad as they are part of a grand design which unfolded generations after, leading to Cally and her sister, Deanna.

The pattern has been changed due to their mother's decision to break the tradition by naming her twins something other than Rozin and Mary. By doing so, Rozin, the mother, not only has unknowingly changed the pattern, but has also deprived her daughters of the ancestral protection that came with the name. This decision can be perceived as another bead placed on the thread, but carelessly. The next bead that should have followed was none other than the bead that represented the twins' protection that came with the names, yet that bead was skipped this generation causing a different pattern to emerge, both on a larger scale and also when it comes to the previously mentioned soul pattern. Considering that beading is a tradition that transcends generation as it passes from mother to daughter, and that due to its very nature is meant to bring families closer, it is ironical how through the art of beading the very opposite was achieved.

Some threads are never meant to meet, while others are meant to intertwine so close together that they become impossible to separate and the dividing of the two would only mean breaking in two halves the same being as the two have indeed become one. Such threads are those of Frank and Rozin, who have become one. Staying apart from one another does nothing more than cause pain for both of them and all other parties involved. Rozin's daughter, Cally, wonders when her mother will "ever stop avoiding Frank and make him her destiny?" (Erdrich, 2002:121). This clearly implies that Rozin's destiny has not yet been fulfilled as she is steering clear off Frank. But does that mean that one can change destiny itself? She has already done so once by choosing to change the names of her twin daughters, so what would actually stop her of altering her destiny even more? This is speculation, given no concrete evidence is provided, however, and probably as part of her destiny was to marry Richard Whiteheart Beads (whose mother came in possession of the blue beads that made Mathilda's necklace), just as it was her destiny to actually end up with Frank, no matter how hard she fought against it.

This fight against destiny may be the result of the choice we are given: "What if, just as sure as we are pulled toward earth and destined to go down into it at last, we are also at the same rate pulled toward heaven? No wonder we are stretched top to bottom from both ends of our being. No wonder the soul can't decide where to wedge itself" (Erdrich, 2002:141).

It is indeed difficult for the soul to decide, just as it is difficult to fight one's destiny and win. Also, if you have won, how would you know if you have changed the pattern or if you are merely completing it, just as it has been designed to begin with? Some questions will remain unanswered, but that is the beauty of the mystery, an enigma that Erdrich clearly wished to preserve within the pages of her novel. The thread that unifies the beaded tapestry holds a deeper significance – the thread of fate. It represents a cosmic force, subtly guiding individuals on their paths.

Through the act of sewing, characters actively participate in the weaving of their destinies, while also influencing the trajectories of others. This notion illuminates the dynamic nature of destiny, shaped not only by external forces but also by the profound impact of personal actions and interactions. We ”are scattered like beads off a necklace and put back together in new patterns, new strings” (Erdrich, 2002:220), and who is to say that those new strings were not chosen for us, long before our very own soul pattern emerged? Still, one thing is certain: we are as both fragile and strong as those delicate threads of life that hold the numerous beads which make us who we are.

In Louise Erdrich’s novel, *The Antelope Wife*, the profound symbolism of beads and sewing takes center stage, expertly unweaving the intricate connection between destiny and personal agency. According to Sean Teuton, ”our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine (...) who and what, and that we are” (Teuton, 2018:2).

Through the intricate symbolism, readers are drawn into a world where the interplay between interconnectedness, individuality, and the mysterious cosmic forces is explored with great depth. As the characters engage in the act of sewing beads, their destinies become intricately woven, their lives being intertwined in a mesmerizing tapestry. Unknotting the profound significance of beads and sewing invites the readers to think about the delicate balance between personal agency and the ethereal powers that shape the characters’ destinies within the captivating pages of the novel.

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