

Female characters combatting male patriarchy in tracks



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The issue of male dominance has long been one of the most prevalent issues in history, male elitism dating all the way back to the beginnings of humanity. Similar to most communities, Native American tribes are no exception to the blatant misogyny against women inflicted by men, whether it's in regards to the society's brutally torturous treatment of women in the past, or the outstandingly high sexual assault rate amongst the female population in the present. As a result, in order to overcompensate for the inequality amongst men and women, strong Native American women have found themselves working to gain their own power, a privilege that was not automatically handed to them when they were born a girl. In *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich, the three female leads are viewed as powerful, strong, and dominant, signifying the complete opposite of the fragile, weak, and timid stereotypes inflicted on women in the past. Throughout their journey, the female characters of *Tracks* circumvent the patriarchy through many tactics: Fleur, by using her sexuality and femininity to her advantage; Pauline, by demanding power through violence and her white roots; and Margaret through her authority and willingness to endure.

Rather than obtaining power through acting like a man and gaining the authority that comes with it, Fleur embraces her femininity and womanhood in all its glory. Throughout the book, she lures in men through her sheer beauty, however underneath the allure of her physical appearance lies a side of Fleur that's in a sense, animalistic. Erdrich wrote, " She swayed them, sotted them, made them curious about her habits, drew them close with careless ease and cast them off with the same indifference" (Erdrich 16). Demonstrating the hold Fleur had over men, this quote describes how she

obtained power in what would otherwise be a situation in which the male held dominance. Men were attracted to the mystery of Fleur Pillager; they were intrigued by her boldness and confidence, however nonetheless, they feared her for her magical power and connection to the lake monster. By using her femininity and her fearlessness (in response to fighting off her enemies) to her advantage, Fleur is able to create an intimidating aura that instills fear amongst men, however leaves them wanting more. And thus, in the rare case that someone were to actually rise up and purposefully wrong her, Fleur was unafraid to utilize her power and seek revenge, returning their wrongdoings at full force.

In contrast to Fleur, who gains power naturally, in a way Pauline forced power onto herself, demanding authority when she chose to identify as fully white and succumb into a life of violence. Compared to the quiet, insecure, and timid Pauline found in the first few chapters, her transition from a mixed blooded Native American to being 100% of European descent greatly factored in her growth of power. As stated on page 137, Pauline says, “ I was not one speck of Indian but wholly white” (Erdrich 137). This quote signifies Pauline’s desire to be fully European; although, when making her transition, it’s unclear if her actual mindset was in the hopes of gaining more power as a European, or if it was just sheer internal racism guiding her. However, regardless of her reasons, becoming white eventually did become one of the main factors of Pauline gaining power. Firstly, while women are obviously extremely subject to prejudice, the combination of being both a female and a person of color is far more oppressive than the former. By eliminating one of those components and ceasing to be Indian completely, Pauline was in a

higher position of power; despite remaining a female, this time around she was a white woman, rather than a Native American. Regardless of one's gender, white people have always remained on top in terms of privilege, with white women considered more powerful in society's eyes to even the strongest men of color.

Furthermore, in Margaret's case, her authority and willingness to endure definitely helped in gaining her power. Despite her old age, her power over others never wavered, instead maybe growing even stronger. Nanapush states, " Margaret Kashpaw was a woman who had sunk her claws in the log and peeled it to a toothpick, and she wasn't going to let any man forget it. Especially me" (Erdrich 47). This quote demonstrates Margaret's pride, and how unashamed she is when interacting with Nanapush. While she doesn't have many interactions with other male characters (besides Eli, and the two who kidnapped her), the relationship between Margaret and Nanapush is complex, in terms of who holds the power. Despite Nanapush being one of the most well respected members of the tribe, it's clear to see that Margaret holds an authority over him, the switch in roles quite uncommon at the time. In addition, even when she was captured, and her head was shaved, she ultimately endured through the situation. To Native Americans, one's hair symbolized power, however despite there not being a single strand on her head, deeming her powerless, Margaret failed to let that phase her and continued on living as she did prior.

In Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, Fleur obtained power through her femininity, Pauline gained power through her white background, and Margaret gained power through her authority. While the three leading ladies of this book <https://assignbuster.com/female-characters-combatting-male-patriarchy-in-tracks/>

could be viewed as inspirational role models to any girl or feminist out there, the fact that these women had to actually work hard to obtain this power, as opposed to men who are born into power, is extremely unfair. Not only is this problem prevalent throughout the book, but it's also an extremely important issue that needs to be dealt with in real life. Women should not have to circumvent the male patriarchy every time they want their voice to be heard, or to be treated like equals. Not every female out there is as intriguing as Fleur, or as scary as Pauline, or as wise as Margaret. Not all the time will women be strong enough to fight for their rights, but regardless that doesn't make them any less deserving of power that would be granted to a man for free. For all the women out there who are sheepish, quiet, and unable to stand up for themselves, they are just as worthy of being treated as equals as everybody else is.