

## In Search of a Lost Heritage: A Study of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

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### Abstract

The life of Native Americans in the post-colonial world is as hyphenated as the term oscillating between lost heritages and experiencing a powerless present. Colonialism made their intangible life, a bewildered one by taking away their lands and rights. The original inhabitants of the land were pushed to reservations and forced to follow the oppressors' ideologies, i.e. their culture and religion. The dominant white culture made numerous attempts to obliterate natives and dismiss them from the mainstream society, but the Native Americans resisted as is witnessed through the characters from Native American literature, including those of Marie and Lulu in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. It is in this context that this paper attempts to study the changed power equilibrium within the native societies, which were beleaguered after colonization through the policies of cultural and religious repression. The impact of colonialism brought with it, its own evils of contaminated cultural and religious beliefs, which resulted in the divided identities of natives. On the one hand, natives discarded their own culture, religion and traditions to assimilate with the white culture; on the other hand few made efforts to revive their own culture and religion by rejecting white ways of life. This paper is a study of the pastiche created thus, and a tug of war between white and native culture, which eventually finds solace after reconciling with the native heritage.

**Keywords:** Assimilation; Colonialism; Native Americans; Post-Colonial.

Native Americans were original inhabitants of America who were subjugated by different nations from time to time. The dawn of colonialism broke with this encounter with the European colonizers mutating the lives of innocent native people. Post-colonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country and of a nation es-

pecially the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated colonial people. It is a body of literary writings that responds to the intellectual discourse of European colonization in Asia, Africa, Middle East, the Pacific and elsewhere. This implies that it mainly deals with the Third World nations. But George Manuel coined the term "Fourth World," which refers to the widely unknown nations of indigenous peoples, i.e., "First Nations" living within or across national state boundaries. The situation of Native Americans pushed them in the category of Fourth World as they have not achieved independent nationhood status.

Robert J.C. Young in 'Postcolonialism-A Very Short Introduction' does not recognize post colonial theory to be a scientific theory. He argues: "It comprises instead a related set of perspectives, which are juxtaposed against one another, on occasion contradictorily." He elaborates that it problematizes concerns related to the place of women, of progression, of ecology, of equal opportunity and several other socially relevant aspects of life. Young sums up thus, "... post colonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between different peoples of the world." (Young 2003:6-7)

Young succinctly sums up the struggles of the Fourth World Nations through this perspective on Postcolonialism and so to study the Native Americans in this light would be worthwhile. The experience of settler colonialism was characterised by landlessness and dispossession and as Young opines, "historically it was most difficult to resolve." (Young 2003: 49) He draws attention to the universality of this experience across lands, "The struggle for 'native title' has also been a major concern for Native Americans in North America, for aboriginals in India and the dispossessed farmers in Zimbabwe who have campaigned for the basic land rights embodied in Abuja Declaration, while dispossession from family land and the claim for the right of return represents the central issue in Palestine." (Young 2003: 49)

#### **Fourth World Literature and Louise Erdrich**

Fourth World consists of the various indigenous civilizations around the world that have not been acknowledged sufficiently. Louise Erdrich through her works encompasses the sufferings of the Native Americans at the hands of Whites. Even today natives are not fully sovereign and are subject to what have been termed as "domestic dependent nation"

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status. That is precisely the reason Native American writing is strait jacketed as Fourth World Literature and not post-colonial writing.

Louise Erdrich is a prolific writer with a huge body of fiction and non-fiction to her credit. The text that is chosen for analysis in this paper is titled *Love Medicine* (1984). As the title suggests, it harks back to the native traditions of creating a panacea for the ills of the world that is dictated by the whims and fancies of the whites. All through the text, the clash between the old and the new is brought about by Erdrich. The adherence to Native American stream of thought is represented throughout the text with the help of the strong female character, Lulu. Juxtaposed against Lulu is the character of Marie who has her own trials and tribulations, which are part of her process of acceptance and denial of the native traditions in preference of the culture, brought in by the white colonizers.

### ***Love Medicine* (1984): A Brief Background**

*Love Medicine* is the first novel by Louise Erdrich, published in 1984, through which she has captured the Red Indian's worldview and portrayed its diversity. The novel is based on the timeline between 1934 and 1984 and each character's life is carved well through various chapters that dovetail into each other to create a solid worldview of the conflict and acceptance of either the native ways as seen in Lulu or through constant struggle as etched through the life of Marie.

The novel analyses the complex interrelationships of five families i.e., the Kashpaws, the Lazarres, the Lamartines, the Morrisseys, and Lulu Nanapush's extended family and also accounts fifty years in the lives of three generations of these genealogies and their relationship with the white-Americans. The disputes and experiences of these characters, on and off the reservation throughout the novel, are analysed. A minute analysis of the narrative reveals the struggle between two diverse cultures with their set of spiritual and religious problems, lives of Native American families suffering the effect of various treaties and policies, poverty and the problem of alcoholism, introduced by whites.

In the novel, native characters are living on the cusp of cultural behaviour and religious spheres, negotiating the yearning to adapt themselves to Euro-American ethos subjected on development, personal contentment, Christianity etc., and at the same time displaying an ethnic attraction towards tribalism, Shamanism, the mythical tradition of their ancestors and indigenous ceremonial life.

### **Marie and Lulu-A Study in Contrasts**

Marie and Lulu are strong female protagonists in the novel *Love Medicine* who represent Native American women power. They display resistance to colonial powers and situations in their own unique ways. While Lulu believes in complete adherence to her native roots, Marie wavers between two opposite poles i.e., Christianity and Shamanic. Marie feels divided, because of social strictures in which she wants to 'fit in', whereas Lulu feels complete in her 'self' but she is a victim of social and political rules and regulations, which divide her life and being into two. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay in *Questions of Cultural Identity* write about Identity in the following words:

"...actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field." (Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay p.4)

Marie is the narrator of the second chapter "Saint Marie" of the novel in which she provides an account of her life, a struggle from Marie Lazarre to become Marie Kashpaw in her urge for power. Marie is a mixed blood as her father was a white and mother was an Indian. To show her state of pull towards her Native and White heritage, her growth can be categorized into three phases: 'her stay in the Convent', 'her marriage to Nector Kashpaw' and the responsibilities bestowed by motherhood. The negotiations of Marie are charted deftly by Erdrich. Her journey is to re-define her identity and to be empowered which is an important part of the novel.

Frantz Fanon opines, "internalization of the dominant standards usually leads to...rejection of their heritage and identity" (Fanon 146). This holds true, especially in the case of Marie who goes through a journey of self-actualization which is charted here. Marie's quest to find her 'self' is divided into three phases as discussed by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the*

Earth where first phase is of assimilation, second shows confusion and third describes conflict. On the other hand, Lulu's life only gets affected by the government's policies and conspiracies. She never gets divided because of society and treats love and life in native and raw form.

Lulu defines her own character by pronouncing these words: "And so when they tell you that I was heartless, a shameless man-chaser, don't ever forget this: I loved what I saw. And yes, it is true that I've done all the things they say. That's not what gets them. What aggravates them is I've never shed one solitary tear. I am not sorry. That's unnatural." (LM p.273)

In pre-colonial times, mental and spiritual strength of native women was celebrated and Lulu represents them. Lulu is more fixed, more fearless and more forceful than most of the characters in the novel. She lives her life on her own terms like a true tribal woman who never cares about any confabulations about her in the society and who cannot be chained to social stigmas. She is contended even in the ending days of her life where she says, "But the truth is I have no regrets" (LM 293). Complying with the ways of the world is never her inclination instead she is determined to raise a conflict with the white invaders.

Lulu represents conflict and she can be placed in stark contrast with Marie Lazarre. The nature of identity crisis, which Marie and Lulu suffer is variant where Marie struggles to achieve it through the religion of whites and later through native ways; Lulu vehemently rejects the ethos of euro-Americans and her 'self' gets deteriorated only by the expansion of white's empire. Lulu is not interested in their religion, culture and ideas of social relationships. She does not turn for 'sainthood' but imbibes courage and resistance from natural world and Native America community as she belongs to 'Pillager' tribe and appreciates her heritage.

Lulu is sure about voicing the collective Native American deep-rooted resentment against the US's policies which are aimed at the total erasure of Native America population from the map of America. Lulu defies the parameters of sexual relationships which were established by Europeans. The Native American tribes envisage sexuality as not associated with ideals of morality or societal pressures and Lulu is a perfect embodiment of the Native American feminine spirit. Lulu never believed in the concept of husband unlike Marie, she even denied wife's role and says, "I never wanted to admit the existence wives" (LM 288).

Lulu is the perfect embodiment of the woman described by Helene Cix-

ous as quoted in the text titled 'Literary Criticism' (Habib 2012: 257) where she encourages women to deliver the birth of a female language, which acknowledges its roots entrenched in the body: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the conscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – non assessed values that will change the rules of the old game." ("LM," 284 in Habib 2012: 257) From the ages, the female body has been a field of repression by male-oriented dogmas, social structure, and even psychoanalysis. These ways of repression were not a way of life for the Native Americans, who believed in freedom of the spirit and the physical self. The manner in which Lulu is comfortable with her physical self and owns it to such an extent that one is forced to bring about the connection with the thought expressed by Cixous, who, "... regards woman's greater attunement to bodily needs and drives as potentially liberating." (Cixous in Habib 2012: 258) Lulu perfectly represents the idea, "there is... no general woman" and no "female sexuality" that might be "uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes." ("LM," 280 in Habib 2012: 258) The concept of sexuality of native people is shown by Lulu, which is opposite to complex European sexual ethos. She defends her dark native ways and makes the world understand the difference between her native and white ways in the following words:

"The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. – It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is within us, and it's militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogmas of castration. They haven't changed a thing: they've theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!" (The Laugh of the Medusa, 884-885)

These lines describe Lulu's resistance to the white culture and its ideologies. She has a strong sense of belonging to her tribe and traditional ways. Like the mythical figure, Medusa she accepts her dark self and her bodily desires, which pulls her close to her native roots. She enjoys her amorous ways and so-called unethical engagements with various men. On the other hand, Marie, who is obsessed with the power of colonizer, makes many attempts to take away 'darkness' from her. She is the representation of a powerless European woman who emerged from strained colo-

nial thought. Before Europeans arrived with their patriarchal system, the women of various tribes possessed esteemed and equal roles, which got curbed with white intervention. She is the one to whom Helen Cixous appeals to come out of the guilt of being a woman and shun away her shame and accept her desires and body to make a place in this male-dominated society. Marie gains her sense of 'self' and marks her presence in her native as well as in the white world towards the end of novel. She acclaims her tribal identity and justifies her dark or Indian powers in the following words: "Here they are returning, arriving over and again, because the unconscious is impregnable. They have wandered around in circles...but for a time only...Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous." (The Laugh of the Medusa, 877-878)

### **Marie's trials with Catholicism**

Ever since she was a child, Marie has been struggling to establish her cultural roots as she was a mixed blood. She is not completely accepted on the reservation because she has a white father and her tribal identity is that of horse thieves, who are considered as "dirty and lowlife". (LM, p. 63) She doesn't have the thorough acceptance among the whites where she is looked down upon as a Native American. The first encounter of Marie with Nector shows her state of rejection of her roots and Nector's denial to accept her as Indian: "Lemme go, you damn Indian, she hisses. Her teeth are strong looking, large and white. You stink to hell!! I have to laugh. She is just a skinny white girl from a family so low you cannot even think they are in the same class as Kashpaws". (LM, p. 59) Her journey is to redefine her identity and to be empowered. At a very tender age of fourteen, Marie initiates her course in search of an authentic identity through religion as Erdrich herself says that identity is "a religious question in the end" (The Progressive Interview p. 39) In her search, she embraces Christianity and enters Sacred Heart Convent to become a nun as she thinks, "I was that girl who thought the black hem of her garment would help me rise" (LM 45).

There is a sense of social status and purity attached to the convent and is considered to be the best place for a girl like her. No other place could attract Marie more than the convent where mere joining the lot gives her social respect, impression of supremacy and acceptability. In the words of Frantz Fanon, Sacred Heart Convent represents "the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And as we know, in this matter many are called but few chosen" (Fanon, p.32). Marie has no such faith in God

but strives for white identity which she thinks is a symbol of power. Even the nuns in the convent do perceive her as an Indian, which also encourages her aspirations more to become the one among them. She says: "I was going up there to pray as good as they could. Because I don't have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they'd have a girl from this reservation as a saint they'd have to kneel to" (LM, p.40).

At the Convent Marie is ill-treated at the hands of Sister Leopolda, who perceives Marie, nothing less than the devil owing to her heritage. Her maltreatment at the hands of Leopolda further pushes her in the middle of the dilemma between her affinities for Native American and Euro American Self. Earlier, she was infatuated by the image of a Christian saint but now the inside voice that was supposed to be of Dark one or Windigo has also disappeared. As Dark one symbolises her Indian heritage.

However, realizing the magnitude of the pain and the distress, which the life of a nun would entail, and the reality of white's religion, Marie takes a final tread out of white's religious place and undertakes her expedition to the previous tribal world. It is the search for an established identity that forces Marie to swing between one cultural and religious sphere to the other. She marries Nector Kashpaw, a man who belongs to a Native American tribe and enjoys much higher reverence and social status than others. Although, Marie seeks and loses power from beginning to end, she does not remain incompetent as the narrative exhibits her to be a powerful survivor.

Lulu and her firm faith in her religious beliefs and her sexuality:

In contrast with Marie is Lulu's character whose fixed roots in her native culture shapes her as a balanced, optimistic and strong woman whereas Marie's oscillating frame of mind records the journey of her life flooded with frustrations, breakdowns and disappointments. It is in the end that Marie attains a stage of comparative calm, something which Lulu enjoys throughout her life. Lulu's all-encompassing love and participation in nature in all its manifestations is reflected in what she says:

"No one ever understood my wild and secret ways. They used to say Lulu Lamartine was like a cat, loving no one, only purring to get what she wanted. But that's not true. I was in love with the whole world and that lived in its rainy arms. Sometimes I'd look out on my yard and green leaves would be glowing. I'd see the oil slick on the wing of grackle. I'd hear the wind rushing, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I'd open my

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mouth wide, ears wide, my heart, and I'd let everything inside". (LM 216)

Lulu defies the parameters of sexual relationships, which were established by the Europeans. The Native American tribes envisage sexuality as not associated with the deals of morality or societal pressures. Kathy Peiss, in the essay, *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays* writes: "...native women were not as uninhibited as most whites thought. Europeans failed to realize that native Peoples did have rules regulating marriage and sexual intercourse, although the rules were sometimes quite different from their own." (Peiss 43) These lines justify Lulu's ways according to her tribal traditions, and her rejection of new regulations of sexuality gives her ultimate power to survive in the new white world.

### **Conclusion**

Louise Erdrich revives the gravity of native culture and traditions through her novels. The present paper explores two female characters from the novel *Love Medicine* to show the importance of tribal identity and to shun the fallacious impression of the whites. The effects of colonialism can be observed on the lives of the native people and their development in all the spheres of life. Both the characters i.e., Marie and Lulu, have been discussed in detail to showcase their identity crisis and their efforts to reconcile with native roots. If Marie oscillates between the two extremes, Lulu leads a settled life by choosing to adopt Native American ways and finds split in her native identity only after government policies for native people. Erdrich, in this novel presents the life of a pure native and mixed-blood, reservation life and life outside it and the complexities involved in their lives after the arrival of Europeans. Conflicts that disturb the person from within and those the society created around them are summed up in the novel through both the characters. Being a Native American writer, Erdrich sees it as her responsibility to put forward Native American history and traditions for the generations to come and for the people who are in a state of confusion between two the opposite paradigms.

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