

THE PORTRAYAL OF MYTHIC AND MODERN VISION OF NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S LOVE MEDICINE AND TRACKS

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Abstract

The present study aims at realizing how the works of Louise Erdrich, a contemporary female Native American writer, truly reflect the artistic and mythic vision of the ancestral Native Americans while simultaneously portraying the hybridized lives of the mixed generations of the Native Americans. Her work, therefore, serves as a site where ancestral and the present vision of the Native American life meet to provide an insight into the transformation of the native people's history, myth, culture, and religion as a consequence of their encounters with white ways of life. The present study seeks to explicate the history of the Native American civilization, their unique vision of the unity of human and non-human creatures, the troubled past experiences of lost lands, forced evacuation from their ancestral lands, subsequent humiliated lives in reservoirs, racial and ethnic discrimination, and finally, the identity crisis arising from the dominant culture's efforts to assimilate the young generations of the Native Americans, in an effort, to alienate them from their cultural, religious and mythic roots.

In-betweenness is a constant feeling of dislocation and identity confusion and Erdrich explores this theme of the cultural confusion and hybrid identity faced by Native American generations in her works. As she herself belonged to two different cultures, a different set of traditions and races her major characters also represent both sides of her heritage. She has gone beyond representing only the Native American characters ingrained in Native Culture and has also portrayed characters that are not pure Native Indians. These mixed or hybrid characters that inhabit her novels are the representatives of a changing, evolving Native American culture and reveal how society and individuals have undergone a transformation.

Key-words: Portrayal, Mythic, Vision, ancestral, hybridized, transformation, discrimination.

Introduction

Critics of Native American literature and anthropological history seem to have agreement on this point that Louise Erdrich with her mixed-race heritage has portrayed the mythic and artistic concerns as well as the orientation of the contemporary generations of the Native Americans.

In order to look into the verity of the claim of some critics of Louise Erdrich, one of the most gifted and prolific writers of Native American literature, that in her creative writings which include a sizable body of novels, non-fiction, and children literature, she has stayed close to her native ancestors' mythic and artistic vision. It is indispensable, in the first place, to develop a deeper understanding of what her native ancestors' mythic and artistic visions entailed and signified. Only then we can venture to analyze whether or not her works correspond to, reflect or provide an insight into Native American ancestors' mythic and artistic vision of life, culture, religion, and the universe.

Before referring to Louise Erdrich's seminal works in which she has presented the contemporary life, history, traditions, culture, identity crisis, and a host of other issues confronting the Native American and mixed-blood Americans, the study intends to briefly look into some of the traditional beliefs and mythical and artistic visions of the Native American ancestors so that on the solid foundation of this Knowledge of the Native American world, we can draw our conclusions about Louise Erdrich's works how they are soaked in and are representative of the Native American culture.

The rationale of getting to look into the mystical and mythical heritage of the Native American dreams and visions is to observe and analyze what cultural transformations and the concomitant identity issues have emerged in the life of the contemporary "pure" and mixed or hybrid American's lives. Although different Native American tribes within the larger system of tradition have slightly different versions of stories about the creation of life, the fundamental regulatory concepts that shape the faith, bind the people together and make them a distinct nation and give them a sense of unified identity are the same.

Research Questions

1. How does Louise Erdrich portray in her novel, *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, the artistic and mythic vision of her ancestress regarding culture, society, religion, and co-existence?
2. How has Louise Erdrich portrayed the hybrid, mixed-race generations of the contemporary Native Americans and the problems of corporate identity faced by these generations in her novel, *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*?

Literature Review

In this part, we intend to survey the relevant literature produced in the relevant field of scholarship to provide an overview of the scholarship in the emerging field of native American literature and critical theory. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the contemporary work being done on the related field so that we could gain insight into numerous dimensions of approach towards Native American cultural heritage and the continuation of its practices by Native American generations of the past and present.

A glance at the contemporary Euro-American world confirmed that because of the flux of migrants to these economically developed countries, these countries and their cultures have become multicultural societies in which different nations and ethnicities live together. As a result of this amalgamation of ethnic and cultural views, new societies have come into being whose defining characteristics are their hybridity and cultural internationalism. America in the present time and Canada, not to talk of the numerous European countries which are inhabited by in a rich variety of ethnic groups of, are concentrated with the white and colored

nations. The inevitable result of the concentration as well as of interaction among the nationals of variegated nations has emerged in the form of hybrid generations who are far more complex than their forefathers and their social, cultural, and political lives are the epitome of what has been called in-betweenness. The white Americans and Native Americans who had lived together, though their history fraught with cultural and religious encounters and conflicts are now seen going along well together despite their distinct ways of life. Whereas the amalgamation of the white and colored poses numerous issues of racial and ethnic differences, on a positive note, through the long years of interaction, they have eventually come to set aside their long-standing differences, learning that having to live on the same land they can no longer deny the existence of the other nor can obliterate the others' culture, history, and traditions which the followers of a culture carry in their veins and practice in their daily life. Therefore, they have realized that living together in a state of mutual tolerance is in the best interest of the country and the society. It has also led to transforming society's cultural fabric: from monolithic society, today's America has involved into vibrant, dynamic, and more culturally and racially accommodating society. It is, however, worthy to note that the issues of racial discrimination, cultural adaptation, inevitable hybridity, and enabling mimicry are still infesting the American society and, now and then, the events of racial discrimination involving murder or other forms of segregation crop up, yet their occurrence is less frequent and less intense.

The native-American novelists including Louis Edrich are fully alive to this transformation of the contemporary American culture and its problems, which they have expressed in their fictional works. The characters of these novels, both pure and mixed generation of the native American, remain caught in the two cultural values, one of their predecessors which they struggle to keep intact at the heavy price of losing their lives, the other, of the contemporary life whose charms and fascination they cannot resist and accumulate the white cultural values. The consequence of this interaction is the hybridity, mimicry, and assimilation which define their contemporary lives.

Nanapush, the narrator of *Tracks*, is thoroughly familiar with and the witness of this cultural transformation that has brought far, reaching changes in the lives of contemporary Americans. He, being the member of the first generation of native Americans who had fought against the white Americans for the preservation of their lands, culture, and history, does not want his granddaughter, Lulu to remain completely isolated from the history of her forefathers. Therefore, he narrates to her the events of the past that befell them cutting the life of many of them. Among the survivors was Lulu's mother Fleur Pillager, a woman of extraordinary abilities, who is believed to possess supernatural powers and the carrier of tribal traditions. Nanapush rightly thinks that if Lulu remained oblivious of the glorious past of her ancestors, her stay at American Boarding School will completely make her cut off from her past traditions.

Cognizant of the value of remaining in touch with the ancestral mythic and visionary ways of the ancestral native Americans, Nanapush, the trickster figure, an intelligent and witty storyteller, tactfully makes Lulu get interested in her own past and mythical figures. This is one way the mythic and visionary native-American culture can be kept alive and the contemporary generation can be saved from being completely immersed into the white ways of living.

The story of Pauline, the native-American converted to Christianity, also illustrates the significance of keeping alive the traditional values and culture of the forefathers. She feels

enamored of white culture and its emancipator vision, so leaving behind her original faith she embraces Christianity and attempts to completely assimilate into white culture. Her efforts, however, do not prove completely successful as she perpetually fails to break with her ancestral tradition and knowledge and despite her best efforts to transform herself into a white woman, remains eternally chased by the shadows of the past. Her bond with the original culture does not get broken, though it weakens considerably. Her cultural identity also remains blurred, as she consistently vacillates between the two cultures and traditions. Confusion overcomes her experiences and she remains neither exclusively this nor that. Stuart Hall (1996) one of the well-known theorists of cultural identities, defines the formation of cultural identity on the basis of one's association with history and culture. He articulates that cultural identity is a matter of one's deep-seated connectedness with the cultural and historical roots, though; as a result, living among the people of other cultural roots, one's bond with original culture may weaken. This definition of cultural identity can very well be applied to the lives of the contemporary generations of native-American to understand how they have severed their relations, to a little or great extent with their own cultural traditions. Because of having been kept away from their own people's views, the younger generations, in the boarding houses, were made to think loathingly of their own past, glorifying the white cultural values which they did not find conflicting with their own culture.

Reflections of Mythic and Modern Native American Life in Love Medicine

The main focus of the non-native, Euro-Americans, as has been demonstrated by Erdrich, has always been towards establishing the subaltern people to have the low origin and degraded cultural background, condemned

to be inferior 'others' of the white, but their claims suggest that they have either been oblivious of the vital truth or willingly overlooked the signs of reality that the White civilization is not unique, and its superiority is not something that can be confidently asserted when Native – American civilization is so similar.

Native American culture and civilization, the expression of ancestors' mythic and artistic vision, cannot simply be forgotten by the generations of native Americans because native Americans in these myths and traditions are embedded their truths of life and vision of the universe. Their love and respect for nature and its creatures whom they believe the part of their lives also constitute the mythic vision of their life. Their ways of life and belief system are completely different from their white counterparts. Therefore to say that these generations have completely been cut off from their ancestors' mythic past is a travesty of truth. Erdrich, for example, in her novels represents the integrated family system which defines native American families as contrasted with the nuclear family system adopted by the white Americans. She presents combined families along with their lineages that trace back the genesis and origin of these families. It is through describing the history of a few families that Erdrich presents the lives of the native Americans using the post-modern technique of multi perspectivism. She narrates one event through the eyes of different narrators. Thus providing multiple versions of one event, by so doing, she not only postmodernist narrative color to her narrative, but also combines native and Euro-American strands of narratology. Parallel to the hybrid nature of her characters, she imparts linguistics hybridity to her narrative as well. What she gains by mixing the oral storytelling tradition American American and textual traditions of storytelling upheld by the European is the excess to a broader audience. Fully alive to the needs of the modern method of storytelling that requires the amalgamation of

different styles, she narrates the tales of tribal customs and history through the multiple narrators. In *Love Medicine*, for example, instead of the one, the narrator we find multiple narrators, like multiple narrators of tracks, relating the same event from different perspectives. The tales of Kashpaw Kinship form the center of interest and they are told from different vantage points that present before us different versions of the same event. Maintaining relationship with the Native – American ancestors' mythic and artistic vision, she, in the manner of other Native-American representative voices like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Sherman Alexie, etc. embark upon the post-modernistic venture of revisiting the Euro-American discursive tradition by narrating the mythic past and artistic vision of Native people's cultural and social integrity. These Native American mixed-race American writers invigorate Native – American cultural traditions and identity formation hitherto misrepresented or completely ignored by the Euro-American centered narratives of Native-American history and experiences. For the Euro-American mainstream culture readership familiar with and fed upon Euro-American literary tradition, Erdrich's fiction renders new patterns of meanings focusing on the fluidity of the cultural identities. This rather uncanny structure of the Native American narrative characteristic of Erdrich's and other Native American writer's fiction, mediating between the two opposing literary and stylistic traditions, produces alternative cultural meanings and defies the exclusivity of the monolithic discourses of mainstream culture. As an inevitable outcome of Erdrich's engagement with the issues of cultural hybridity faced by the mixed breed second generation Native Americans, Erdrich's novels are informed by the issues of marginality and liminality—the defining characteristics of the post-modernistic, postcolonial condition of existence of the marginalized communities.

The contrastive study of Native-American literature from a postcolonial perspective while using a poststructuralist methodology, helps us establish the informative link between Native-American and postcolonial writing, though Native-American writers don't explicitly present their point of view in a postcolonial frame of reference, however, implicitly Erdrich's consistent projection of the Native American subject's marginalized status pulls her narratives in the ambit of a postcolonial matrix. The structural and stylistic proximity of her works with Euro-American narratives with strong advocacy of Native-American cultural identity makes her fiction an apt illustration of the literature of the indigenous "other" produced to write back to the Empire. Erdrich's methods and aesthetic strategies for the representation of the complexities of the Native-American and mixed-race identities in the contemporary era have fair pints of identification with postcolonial writings. What is unmistakably common between the two distant yet strikingly similar ways of representation (Native-American and postcolonial) are the reshaping of the western European literary classics from non-western subjectivity, the native remolding of the Euro-American discursive construction of the indigenous identities, the subversion of power structures between the outsider and insider, etc.

Representation of Cultural and Corporate Native American Identities in Tracks

Apart from *Love Medicine* the other novels of Erdrich that followed *Love Medicine* both chronologically and thematically closely follow the writer's commitment to bringing forth the traditional and cultural aspects of the Native American subject's subsistence and identity. The manifold problems that the Native Americans had to face following their eviction from their Native lands and the subsequent rounding up in the large unhygienic tracts of reservations have been beautifully and artistically highlighted by Erdrich.

Native American life at the reservations apart from the essentialist, communal experience became the metaphor of structured and segregated cultures. Not content with such

classification and compartmentalization of cultures, and growing apprehensive of the Native American culture's proliferation into the white American life, thus contaminating the purity of the dominant culture, the American Government started assimilation policy, aimed at obliterating Native Culture, which resulted in the dualistic state of being among Native peoples. In her celebrated novel *Tracks*, Edrich recounts the events that befell the Pillagers family killing all of them but Fleur Pillager who alone survived the extremities of weather and, later on, the brutality of white Americans in the butcher's shop when they raped her, only to take revenge upon them through the intervention of supernatural forces which she is supposed to represent. After surviving the devastating winter and epidemic when she is rescued by Nanapush and brought up as his daughter, she goes to Oregon, a white population, to work in a butcher's shop with the white males. Being raped by the white man, she wreaks revenge upon them by supposedly calling the god of water. Her subsequent falling in love with Eli Kashpaw and giving birth to a child whose father remains an enigma, apparently she lives placid life with her in-laws until she comes to be envied by polling who ultimately succeeds in estranging her husband away from her. Fleur Pillager becomes the symbol of attachment to ancestral cultural and mythic traditions as she holds to her lands till her last breath in the face worst weather and colonizing policies of the white Americans. Her mysterious power through which she hurls vengeance upon her rappers might have been incredible for the white people, but they were perfectly credible for the native population since they had unconditional faith in their ancestors' religion. Nanapush, the guardian of the native traditions, makes it his prime responsibility to inculcate in the mind of Lulu the uncanny power of Lulu. Fleur, the last of Pillagers, inspires the rest of the people with her cultural identity. She strongly resists the assimilationist policies of the white Americans and remains stuck to the woods where she seeks refuge from the plunder of the colonizers. She is the only repetitive figure of the Anishinabb tribe who is believed to have carried on the mysterious power from her ancestor spirits with which she can perform incredible actions. Edrich, by portraying in form of Fleur a potential native character, has also incorporated into the novel feminist strand as Fleur represents the powerful feminine character. In Native American culture, which was predominantly matriarchal culture, women were not supposed redundant or inferior to males because they are less powerful or have inferior intellects than males. Fleur Pillager stands for the power of female figures in Native American women and their equal place with men. Without any shred of doubt, this matriarchal nature of the Native American society puts them in contrast with the Euro Americans as the latter is a patriarchal society in which men are supposed privileged and superior to women in respect of their talents that provides them the excuse to suppress the women and deprive them of their legitimate rights. On the contrary, women in Native American culture were given the same rights as enjoyed by the male, a fact that places Native culture on a higher pedestal than white societies which still continue exploiting their women in one or the other pretext.

Making use of the post-structural and post-modern techniques Edrich, herself a hybrid Native American, narrates the story of the tracks through multiple narrators and multiple perspectives for the readers may get conflicting yet complementary versions of the same story. Instead of relating universalist, singular, and monolithic truth about the phenomenon, she rather gives multiple narratives to avoid ablate truths. Writing in a tradition antagonistic to European meta-narratives, she presents the truths in the form of relative and multiple forms of truth incorporating white and native perspectives. This style allows her to dwell upon the growing tension between the two generations of the same culture. She seems to have adopted the style of multiple narrative techniques through her belonging to two different cultures that inevitably helped her project her ancestral heritage as well as the white Americans academic influences upon her. She keeps strong links alive with her ancestral and the contemporary

American traditions in her novels, for that seemed to her a necessary option to make her novels find a readership among the modern readers. The themes of her novel such as her whole great appeal for the readers of both sides. In “Tracks”, for example, the versions of the same story narrated by Nanapush and Pauline juxtapose two truths, neither validating nor invalidating either.

Conclusion

In the light of the comprehensive discussion and analysis of two of Louise Erdrich’s works, we can confidently establish that Louise Erdrich has remained true to her native ancestors’ mythic and artistic vision while writing fiction that candidly explained the cultural issues facing contemporary American and mixed heritage American Indian. She has narrated her stories blending the native oral tradition and the European narratological conventions. She has done so because she wanted to demonstrate that the American Indians living in the contemporary hybrid American culture have their roots in two cultural traditions: the traditional native-American culture which practiced mythological religious beliefs and the modern American culture with its dominant white lifestyle. Similarly, in her novels also she artistically blends white and native narrative traditions.

Nanapush’s relating of Fleur’s story of heroic struggle at preserving her Tribe’s land and identify to Lulu, Fleur’s daughter, reveals how the best of the Natives like Fleur, against the advice of many ordinary tribesmen who had succumbed to cultural confusion, had demonstrated heroic resistance and perseverance to preserve what was left to preserve: the tribal name, disintegrating tradition, and the mythic and artistic vision of the ancestors. The second narrative of Pauline Puyat, a hybrid of Canadian and Ojibwe ethnicity, who renounces and detests Ojibwe ways and identify, also centers around Fleur’s mysterious and daring character, who firmly maintains Ojibwe identity in the midst of the confusion ensuing from oppositional forces of two entirely different cultures at work.

As a guide to European explorers, savior of Fleur from her sickness, a receiver of off-reservation boarding School education, Nanapush has many sides to his complex personality and is among very few natives who can negotiate and write the English language. His experience and skill in dealing with the two cultures help him gain an inside / outside view of the changing culture, and after years of negotiations between the two socio-cultural climates, he thinks against the possibility of keeping the waters of cultures pure and clean and says “waters were so muddy” between the cultures not excluding himself from the blame of having contaminated the waters. But as he knew purity of cultures is a myth in cultures where peoples of different ethnicities subsist, he uses his knowledge about the dominant culture and people to preserve the integrity of his own culture, and unlike Fleur or Pauline who represents the two extremes; he enjoys the better of the two cultures and triumphantly represents both of them. The new world he represents in place of rigid, inflexible, and homogeneous society is characterized by a multi-faceted and poly-cultural world with an abundant variety of cultures, histories, values, and traditions. It is chiefly through his character that Erdrich has demonstrated how the natives can survive in the radically transformed circumstances, and by imbibing and accepting the new conditions they can exert their new identity which is the blending of two worlds, two cultures, two histories, and two nations.

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