**Different Shades of Multiculturalism Balanced in Louise Erdrich’s**

***Love Medicine***

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**Abstract:** The emotional and identitary entanglements, which define Louise Erdrich’s debut novel, *Love Medicine*, lead the readers to explore the violent, yet tender environment, with both gothic and realistic elements that the work embraces in a balanced way. The cultural mixture the author portrays brings upon interaction between the Native Americans and the outsiders, which proves the discontinuity in the cultural reality of the Chippewa. The paper approaches the multicultural post-modern world of the novel hinting at identity and belonging, while analysing the voices that engage in self and community exploration forcing “onness and manyness” collide most of the time.

**Key-words:** voice, collision, multiculturalism, individual, community

*Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich’s first novel, is made up of a series of stories first published together in 1984 and revised for a second 1993 edition, which has drawn the attention of both readers and critics upon her talent and style. The collection brings forward an interconnection of different families who live on the reservation the author had created for her characters, or in the area nearby. The novel is set in North-Dakota in a Chippewa reservation and together with *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks* and *The Bingo Place* presents the history of the same kinship, being the first element in Erdrich’s tetralogy dealing with the life of Native Americans and they way they are perceived by others. The special insight we are offered into the lives of the Native Americans make the readers better grasp the oral tradition and the customs of their culture as the author is determined to break with stereotypes and bring forward elements meant to clarify certain issues to the ones enjoying her work. “Erdrich’s fiction shows a collision of worlds as her novel explores the discontinuity in the cultural reality of the Chippewa’s situation juxtaposed against the ahistoricity of nature and the supernatural that permeates the novel’s collective consciousness. This cultural tension results in confusion as well as spiritual and psychological ill health.” (Sanders, 1998: 129)

The name critics have chosen to describe Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* is one associated to James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* and Edore Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, namely a short story cycle or short story sequence. (Stookey, 1999: 32) In the author’s own words this type of storytelling is specific to the Native Americans who develop upon different topics starting from one issue and moving on to others like the pieces of a domino connected to the previous and the next but never focusing on just one. The oral tradition of the Native Americans is, therefore, exposed in Erdrich’s work, and this makes it rather difficult for a reader to offer a chronological summary of the work, as the tales are sequences, and there exists no central character, even though critics have argued it to be the haunting presence of June or Lipsha Morrissey. The plot does not focus just on one main topic because “the fragmentary story cycle progresses erratically and nondirectionally, looping forward and backward, often omitting causal links between physical and psychological events” (Cox, 1998: 151).  
 Although dealing with the position of a minority, the author chose to point out in several interviews that, at least in her opinion, the frequently used term of Native American is merely an ideological construction that was brought into discussion only as an academic distinction. The notion of Native American is not able to define clearly the people they are trying to describe by using such denominations. The idea of using similar labels to portray individuals is not regarded by Erdrich as something she would approve of, taking into account that her mother is Native American, while her father is a German-American. So, in her case, the notion of hybridity both when talking about herself and her work inevitably comes up and clearly shapes her style and approach. Making use of her biographic elements is an intelligent manoeuvre from Louise Erdrich’s part as she is not entirely Native American, nor is she German-American, so, by hinting at offering a veridical picture of the community, she belongs to, the author shows that there is willingness to reveal her cultural position and search for identity. The embrace of both cultures is only one advantage she can benefit from while searching for her textual and cultural self.

This search for a healthy balance is evinced in the characters’ belief systems, in their relationships with each other, and within their own sense of personal identity. … *Love Medicine* depicts characters whose searches lead them to discard obsolete identities as they journey towards a sense of subjectivity and self-knowledge; this journey becomes a process of healing. (Sanders, 1998: 129-130)

The perfect example is Lipsha, who after finding the truth about his parentage starts to understand the family connections and adapt to the new situation “I have some powers which, now that I think of it, was likely come down from Old Man Pillager. And then there is the newfound fact of insight I inherited from Lulu, as well as the familiar teachings of Grandma Kashpaw on visioning what comes to pass with a lump of tinfoil. It was all these connecting threads of power.” (Erdrichh, 2004: 341)

By following the goal of finding and defining their identity Erdrich’s characters have provided critics with the idea that the novel is part of the postcolonial type. So, many have argued such a reading to the novel as a reaction to the Anglo-American introduction of racial differentiation revealing the existence of otherness. Erdrich’s characters behave in a certain way, which is specific to their group, challenging the concepts of identity and cultural variety, considering

the two familiar traditions in the discourse of identity: the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture. In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation where the Image is confronted with its difference, its Other. (Bhabha, 1994: 46)

The search they undergo is one that the author can easily relate to, so it is a display of the need they have to find themselves. “Drawing on both Native American oral traditions and conventional Euro-American narrative forms, Erdrich creates a new set of textual gestures that can more faithfully capture the multiple voices and extended family networks of Native American ‘individuals’.” (Shelley Reid, 2000: 67) One cannot simply choose a group they want to be part of as long as they consider themselves as truly belonging to the two of them. The choice is hard to make and sometimes its difficulty is what gives the savour of being in-between cultures as the author herself mentions in several interviews: “The ambivalence created in this attempted reconciliation underscores the difficulty faced by Erdrich’s characters in reaching a balance between the spheres of past and present, personal and communal, private and public.” (Sanders, 1998: 129) By fighting widely known ideas the novel brings forward a sincere appreciation of women and Native Americans as well being on the edge as the author herself numerous times approached the topic. The way she tackles with “fabrications” as Karen Castellucci Cox names them and especially her talent for introducing such elements alongside the traditional realistic values makes Erdrich even more challenging to the readers. “Erdrich ironically plays with what we usually perceive as real in contrast to what we consider fantastic or utopic. She switches back and forth between those two codes to raise our level of awareness of the constructed nature of all reality.” (Rosenthal, 2003: 109) Breaking all sorts of stereotypes the author is able to create the characters she had desired, with the plot she had envisioned showing that there are always more sides to one story. By having multiple narrators exposing their personal view of the series of events the readers are invited to perceive them as part of a bigger whole gradually presented to them. The world Erdrich’s characters share has its imprint on their personalities and on the way; they reveal their stories one being able to grasp the recurring patterns. *Love Medicine* does not follow the traditional trail and so “it is thus not only the text that seems fragmented and disorganized, but also the people it represents. Such readings emerge from Western beliefs that identity, and thus identity narrative, is supposed to be whole, uniform, and seamless, that fragmentation and ambiguity connote chaos and the failure of self-actualization.” (Shelley Reid, 2000: 69)

The freedom Erdrich enjoys in presenting the stories of her characters enables her to offer them the possibility of revealing themselves through their own memories. The families’ stories are the framework she intended the reader to perceive, not only for the Native American population, but also for being able to analyse their own position towards others. The public sphere is very important because *Love Medicine* does not centre on one traditional protagonist, readers choosing their own favourite characters whose stories they wish to follow throughout the novels making up Erdrich’s tetralogy. Each new story comes on the sediment of the previous ones and helps put a new piece to the image that the author intends to present to the readers. There is also a certain ignorance of space and time up to one point everything being based upon a subjective perspective and nothing more.

Erdrich moreover uses trickster as a rhetorical device as she shifts meaning, perspective, and voices throughout the tetralogy. By breaking with certain story types and narrative conventions, Erdrich disrupts representations of women and offers other narrative possibilities. Storytelling becomes a means for creating a different reality, a place of belonging in between, a matter of survival. (Rosenthal, 2003: 150).

The overlapping of stories, the repetitions and the flashbacks are regarded as characteristic to the postmodernist writings. The fact that the characters refuse to reveal all the parts of the stories show their determination of sharing the information they feel comfortable about, creating the image they desire others to see. One example could be seen in Lipsha’s refusal to tell the truth about Gerry’s actions and his involvement with the killing of the police officer.

If I tell you he said no, you will think he was lying. You will think a man don’t get two consecutive life sentences for nothing beneath the U.S. judicial system. You’ll keep thinking that, too, unless you happen to rub against that system on your own. Then things will astonish you. I promise they will.   
 If I tell you he said yes, and relate to you how it all happened, it might get used against him. I’m sorry but I just don’t trust to write down what he answered, yes or no. We have entered an area of too deep water.

Let’s just say he answered: ‘That’s the penetrating mystery of it. Nobody knows’. (Erdrich, 2004: 364)

The fifty years presented by Erdrich in her novel correlating five different families and exposing the feelings of her characters while dealing with everyday life’s problems as well as identity issues they are confronted with most of the time. The author is not in the least judgemental about her characters as she portrays them in connection with infidelity, alcoholism and even criminality, having different kinds of dilemmas and as is the case of Nector Kashpaw regarding his feelings for his wife, Marie, and for Lulu Lamartine. The opposition that the author brings forward between Marie and Lulu relates to the ideas of whore and saint, who, eventually, in the retirement home find a way to become friends while Nector is living his second childhood. After many years of knowing that Nector truly loved Lulu, but actually married Marie for reasons known only to himself, and after ignoring one important letter, Marie can learn to accept her life. Everyone does not only know the love triangle but it represents the trigger of the love medicine making by Lipsha Morrisey at the request of his adopting grandmother, Marie.   
 As Lipsha mentioned before “I have the touch” and so he can prepare different potions for healing, having trust in himself that Marie’s wish could become reality after so many years of waiting and hoping. At first he might have wanted to ask a real specialist such as Fleur but his being afraid of her forces him to find solutions on his own. “But love medicines is not for the layman to handle. You don’s just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one. You could really mess up your life grinding the wrong thing.”(Erdrich,2004, 241)   
 Unfortunately, Marie and Lipsha’s plan does not exactly go as they have thought it would. The choice of having Nector eat a male goose’s heart, while Marie was supposed to eat a female goose’s one because they mate for life seemed a good idea at first as Nector’s infidelity and his comments related to Lulu were becoming unbearable to his wife. “Maybe it’s all invisible and then maybe again it’s all magic. Love is a stony road. We know that for sure. If it’s true that the higher feelings of devotion get lodged in the heart like people say, then we’d be home free. If not, eating goose heart couldn’t harm nobody anyway.” (Erdrich, 2004, 242) However, Lipsha does not get the goose heart; he instead stops at the supermarket for a turkey one. By doing so, he is changing the tradition and altering his own view with the “evil shortcut.” Mackenzie regards this as a change Lipsha brings to the whole Chippewa tradition, while Quennet considers it an example of cultural synchronism “Erdrich not only fuses traditional myth with contemporary means but she transfers the supernatural and fantastic of love medicines into the realm of the commonplace, blending the natural with the supernatural.” (Quennet, 2001: 91) The two visions of *Love Medicine* are the Native American and the Western one. If for the Westerners an explanation regarding the medicine is needed for the Native Americans everything seems completely ordinary. The irony the author has regarding the white community, who has lost all faith in magic and the supernatural, is reverted towards the Native Americans later on. Le Guin believes that this magical realism Erdrich displays is better described in the idea of “oneness and manyness” intertwining reality and magical realism.  
 Coming back to Marie’s desire to keep Nector to herself, the ardent wish she has had for years makes her insist too much about his eating the goose heart. Her husband senses her determination, and so, he decides to tease her about it, and when she is on the verge of losing her temper, she proves unable to stop herself from having him

hopped up quick as a wink and slugged him between the shoulderblades to make him swallow. Only thing is, he choked. He choked really bad. A person can choke to death … But there’s the factor of decision: he wasn’t chocking on the heart alone. There was more to it than that. It was other things that choked him as well. It didn’t seem he wanted to struggle or fight. Death came and tapped his chest and he went just like that. (Erdrich, 2004: 250)

Lipsha’s belief that he can have the necessary gift for changing things and the others’ lack of surprise regarding such issues leads to the Native American tradition, which involves the belief in miracles as Erdrich herself mentioned in interviews. By growing up and hearing about unbelievable situations, the author is able to introduce in her work the celebration of the Ojibwa heritage. “Just like the cunning trickster, who is hero and villain, saint and devil, jester and saviour, Erdrich’s narratives defy fixture in content and form by playing with oppositions. As the trickster is a comic figure who humorously transcends one reality to enter another, Erdrich’s narrative technique resists finite (serious) signification and appropriation.” (Rosenthal, 2003: 109) Erdrich wants to portray and even promote the Native American traditions, but still in her writing there is no reference to the whites as being a threat, the things she fears are the gradual loss of identity by allowing the dominating culture take over and the choice of adopting different Euro-American traditions. Her view is best expressed in her description of Lyman’s factory, which although produces goods made by the natives they are transformed in traditional artefacts as the others might view them. “An attractively framed symbol of America’s past. Perfect for the home or office. A great addition to the sportsman’s den. All authentic designs and childsafe materials. Crafted under the auspices of the U.S. Department of the Interior, Anishinabe Enterprises, Inc. Hand produced by Tribal Members.” (Erdrich, 2004: 310)

Erdrich intention of presenting the world of the Native Americans is not one of showing only the gender, class, political, cultural, traditional differences but one that can also reveal her desire of making people adapt their position towards identity and self-definitions. This cross-cultural translation is necessary as “In late twentieth-century America it may thus no longer be as personally, culturally, or nationally necessary to define our-selves as unified, discrete individuals operating on smooth time-lines of progress.” (Shelley Reid, 2000: 84)

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