

Exploring the Theme of Native American Identity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich

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Abstract

American novelist Louise Erdrich is considered as one of the most significant writers of Native American Renaissance. Born in Minnesota, her father was of German ancestry and her mother was half Native American, from Chippewa/ Ojibwe tribe. Through her books, she has contributed a lot to the mainstream representation of Native American culture and history that has normally been marginalised in the contemporary American literature. For all her literary works, she draws on her roots for inspiration. The North Dakota Reserve, where her family lived/lives and their personal experiences are core of her books. This research paper will make an attempt to analyse Louise Erdrich's select fiction as a platform for Native American identity. The paper emphasises that without committing to a political agenda, she weaves the mythologies, beliefs and stories of her ancestors. With heart-warming sensitivity, she sheds light on the trials and tribulations of living with limited resources on Reservations as well as the desire to establish an identity in the modern world. The objective of the article is to illustrate that through her gift for story-telling, Louise Erdrich has helped build a positive image for the ethnic community and earned them respect in the mainstream society.

Key Words: Louise Erdrich, Native American, Indigenous, North Dakota, Identity

Until the twentieth Century, Native American stories were widely ignored by writers and historians of English and American literature. Their literature was based on folklores and hence passed on orally from generation to generation as sacred stories. As a result, no documentation of their lives was available. It was also assumed that these stories held meaning and significance only for people with a particular way of life. It was merely incorporated in research of ethnic studies and was not promoted as part of larger narrative. However, this perception began to change when education reached their Reservations. Equipped with substantial knowledge of English language, indigenous people with flair for story-telling began to write their stories and opened their rich heritage to the world. Writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday and James Welch started a movement to bring Indian American issues to the forefront of literary world and their efforts were hailed as a beginning of Native American Renaissance which was long overdue. This literary awakening led to heightened interest in the indigenous culture, history and writings that were earlier ignored. Their literature talked about the post-apocalyptic sense of life because it was believed that the native people had already lost everything when white men attacked them. Having faced near extinction and cultural annihilation, the survivors were now ready to tell their stories to the world. These writers took upon themselves the responsibility of restoring the lost glory of Natives. They used this opportunity to give voice and platform to forgotten stories of their ancestors and the problems that they had faced over centuries due to racism, poverty and dislocation.

This initiative was carried forward by the next generation of Native American writers like Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, and Paula Gunn Allen. Their literature is characterised by certain specifics such as- the estranged protagonist who returns to his roots after surviving in the white man's society, and finds himself caught between two ideologies as he searches for a viable identity. These new-age writers have written literature that is rooted in tradition but universal in its relevance. Apart from this standard narrative, some of these writers like Louise Erdrich and Thomas King move beyond the conflict between modernisation and tradition. They wrote about assimilation with the mainstream America instead of just pointing accusatory fingers for their plight. These writers were from "mixed" heritage who tried to explore new possibilities through their writings. This hybridisation has led to a debate over benefits and problems of fusing the mainstream and ethnic cultures. But their acceptance by literary world has also raised questions about maintaining a separatist identity by the puritans.

Pulitzer Prize finalist Louise Erdrich is a contemporary, multifaceted American author of indigenous heritage. She is a novelist, poet, publisher, short story and children's book writer featuring Native characters and settings. Her prolific oeuvre includes sixteen novels, a collection of short stories, six children's books, several volumes of poetry, and a memoir. At the beginning of her career, she was hailed by critic Kenneth Lincoln as "one of the most significant writers of second wave of Native American Renaissance." Her popularity as a writer has helped her reach wider audience who empathise with the issues she is writing about. Every time a new book of hers is released, it is considered an event in the literary world. It was evidenced in the release of sixteenth novel *The Night Watchman* which was published in March, 2020, just when the world was on the verge of an unprecedented lockdown due to the pandemic. Even at such a catastrophic time, her book was met with highest praise by critics and readers alike and made it to the top of NY Times bestsellers list.

Louise Erdrich truly embodies the core values of America's multiculturalism. She was born "mixed blood"—her mother was French-Chippewa (also known as Ojibwe) and her father was German-American. Her parents taught at a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school. Growing up, she saw her maternal grandfather as the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribal chair for many years. Her parents nurtured a literary atmosphere at home and all the children were encouraged to express themselves through writing from an early age. The siblings including Louise were motivated to write their own stories and narrate them at family get-togethers. In her biography in *Docplayer*, Erdrich is quoted as saying, "The people in our families ... love to tell a good story. People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another." This introduction to storytelling from a young age helped in nurturing her prodigious talent as a creative writer. It may seem that she found her calling as a storyteller from a young age, but the interesting fact is that her talent was not limited to writing stories only. She started her career as a poet. Two books of Erdrich's poetry, *Imagination* (1981) and *Jacklight* (1984), had already published before her debut novel *Love Medicine* (1984) was accepted for publication.

Her husband, writer and publisher Michael Dorris, played an important role in getting her first novel published. Dorris was also of mixed parentage and was proud of his roots. He encouraged Erdrich to give voice to her ancestry through her writings. When sent out to publishers, *Love Medicine* was rejected due to its unusual narrative style. Dorris took it upon himself to promote the novel by acting as her literary agent. His efforts finally paid off and

the novel was published. It quickly became a bestseller and won many awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the L.A. Times Best Novel of the Year, and the Janet Kaufman Award for Best First Novel. Novelist Toni Morrison highly praised the novel for its “originality, authority, tenderness, and pitiless wild wit.” (Fit College). The success of the novel launched Erdrich’s much revered career.

Based on the life of two Native-American families Lamatines and Kashpaws belonging to Anishinaabe tribe who live in a fictional town called Argus, *Love Medicine* is a collection of inter-connected stories. The novel traverses a span of fifty years, with the story moving back and forth between 1930s and 1980s, providing a complete chronological view of the tribe’s culture, the people inhabiting it, and the changes that come in their lives with progress in society. When Erdrich accepted the National Book Critics Circle award for the year’s best novelist, she acknowledged the influence of her Anishinaabe heritage, saying, “I accept this award in the spirit of the people who speak through this book” (Voices from the Gaps).

Love Medicine became first novel in the Argus trilogy, followed by *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *Tracks* (1988). In the next two novels, Erdrich introduces two more families the Pillagers, and the Morrisseys, creating a colourful, wholesome picture of a complex community. In her unique lyrical prose and interwoven narration, she makes all the characters come alive. Erdrich, chooses narrators from various age-groups and different stations in the community, thus representing the families in non-hierarchical terms. She also employs time in a cyclic manner by going back and forth several decades giving a holistic temporal view.

Louise Erdrich presents a mélange of modern American life and traditional practices in her ‘Justice’ trilogy as well. It comprises of *The Plague of Doves* (2008), *The Round House* (2012) and *LaRose* (2016). All three novels are based in Pluto, a village in a Chippewa reservation in North Dakota and deal with different aspects of crime. Each novel takes up the situational complexities of a crime against native American people. When justice is denied, then consequences of such actions has an unprecedented impact on individuals, families, and communities; scarring their psyche for generations. She asks the pertinent question- what are a community’s options for avenging an act of violence when there is no legal system to carry out justice to give closure to the victims. The recurring magic realism that defined her earlier books come into play here as well. She subtly puts forth the idea that there are eternal spirits in the land of ethnic people. They guide their way of life by teaching them to forgive but not always forget; and if a heinous crime goes unpunished than to seek justice in their own ways.

The first novel in the trilogy *The Plague of Doves* is often hailed as Erdrich’s masterpiece. It was a Pulitzer prize finalist and went on to win several awards for its literary excellence. Philip Roth hailed it as “the zenith of Louise Erdrich’s imaginative freedom”. It investigates the massacre of a white farm family and the subsequent killing of three Chippewa men and one child from a neighbouring reservation by a lynch mob. Even though the crime was committed in the early twentieth century, its repercussions are still felt in the community three generations later. It is widely believed that the killed men were innocent while the real culprits went scot-free. The novel is a layered account in Erdrich’s signature style. It is narrated from the perspective of four characters belonging to two different generations: Evelina Harp and Marn Wolde are the youngsters; while Mooshum and Doctor Cordelia Lochren belong to the older generation. Like a murder mystery imbued with Native American history, the novel tries to solve the crime like a jigsaw puzzle. Eventually, the

pieces fall into place, and the identity of the murderer emerges on the last page. Along the way, the writer raises some mystical questions that add nuances to the story. Using a historical narrative, she questions if a place can forget its traumatic past and move forward. Can the people find alternative ways of living on a land that has its painful history transcribed on it? It is a masterful tale of Native American history, a coming-of-age story, and a novel of suspense.

Second novel in the trilogy is *The Round House* was a winner of National Book Award in Fiction. The Story is based in 1988 when an Indian American woman, Geraldine, is raped by a white man on the borders of the reservation. As per the archaic laws, the criminal cannot be arrested, pushing the family to the verge of a breakdown. Joe Coutts, the victim's 13-year-old son decides to take law in his hands. In the end Joe executes Linden Lark, the rapist, in an obvious case of vigilante violence. Erdrich, in her afterword, explains the ending by assuring the readers that this violence is for the greater good of humanity. She associates Linden to the cannibalistic creature Wiindigoo of Anishinaabe mythology who needs to be punished; and justifies his murder by Joe as ceremonial sacrifice. The writer took a stylistic break from using multiple narrators and narrates the entire story from the point of view of Joe, thus making it an intense, emotional coming-of-age saga.

The trilogy that started with *The Plague of Doves* reaches its conclusion with *LaRose*. The main theme of this emotionally haunting story is 'forgiveness'. This story begins in 1999 with a tragedy that throws two Indian families, Raviches and Irons, into great turmoil and pain. While hunting a buck, Landreaux Iron accidentally kills the son of his close friend Peter Ravich. After much soul searching, he decides to give his youngest son LaRose to the Ravich family as this is the honourable way of seeking forgiveness for an unintentional crime. This is how the indigenous people atoned for their crimes in the ancient days. Rest of the story follows the journey of these two families adjusting to this strange process. As the story progresses the children of both the families become the unifying factor who display wisdom beyond their years and end up protecting the adults. While the adults flounder and struggle with their inner demons, the children work through their problems and come out stronger. They emerge as more capable and bring the adults back to a semblance of normalcy. Once again, the writer shows her strength in retaining the best parts of her heritage and helps her readers in making sense of things that are beyond our control.

Inspired by the ideology of her literary role model William Faulkner that "The past is never dead. It is not even past", Louise Erdrich creates a story where the ancestors and their powers live on fusing with the present. In her magical world, ancient past coexists with contemporary life. We learn that the main character who is a five years old boy is actually descended from generations of female LaRoses and blessed by the powers of his namesake ancestors. He is the fifth in a line in his family and, in the story, we meet them all starting from the first LaRose in 1839. The boy becomes an ambassador of healing and sets in motion a chain of events that transform the lives of all he touches.

Erdrich's latest novel *The Night Watchman*, published in March 2020 is another literary bonanza by the writer. Carrying forward her legacy of narrating stories about Native American characters, this time she has chosen the politically controversial era of post-world war America. 1950s was a crucial time because US government was trying to close the reservations by breaking its treaty of separate habitats. This sensitive time forms the background of the story. The story of Thomas "Muskrat" Wazhashk and the Turtle Mountain

People is at once, heart-wrenching and life-affirming. Thomas is the night watchman at a factory and is based on the author's grandfather. He is a loving, tireless man who cares deeply about his community. As the story progresses, we learn that Thomas has written hundreds of letters to the government pleading to not evict the tribe from the Reservation but to no avail. This once powerful tribe of hunters and gatherers was forced onto a small plot of land and had to learn how to farm in order to exist. But now even this is in danger of being taken away. The story also focuses on Patrice, Thomas' daughter, who travels to the city to find her lost sister, gets caught in the drift of city-life, and struggles to straddle two worlds. The heart of the story is this inevitable course of changing circumstances and the conflict between tradition and modernism. The older generation has struggled to adjust to completely new way of life. The younger generation still looks up to the elders but also wants what they see in the outside world. In Erdrich's trademark uncomplicated prose, the story pulls us in the world of the tribe where shamans, magic and ancestral spirits still guide the course of life. The genocide of American Indian culture is a historical fact but in her sensitive style, Erdrich tries to convey that the value of this heritage is not redundant. It is not an ideal world, but the writer is proud of her inheritance and it reflects in the text.

Louise Erdrich started her writing career on the cusp of various intersections: Her heritage (Native American-Chippewa and Euro-American-French and German); her upbringing (Turtle Mountain Reservation, North Dakota) and her education (When she entered Dartmouth College in 1972, she was the first woman to do so). Being a Chippewa spokesperson was the last thing on her mind. It is a known fact that she majored in Creative writing and attended the Native American Studies program only out of curiosity. But this became the shaping force of her existence as a writer. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Erdrich opposed the idea of typecasting her on the basis of her ethnic identity: "I don't think American Indian literature should be distinguished from mainstream literature. Setting it apart and saying that people with special interest might read this literature sets Indians apart too". Instead of tying her identity to being known only as a Native American writer, she insisted that she would like to be recognised as a writer who happens to be a Native American.

In a way Louise Erdrich's struggles have been similar to Vivian Twostar, the protagonist of her novel *The Crown of Columbus* (1991). Vivian is of mixed-blood, working as a Professor of Anthropology. Despite being an academician, everyone around her tries to stereotype her as "a Native writer" while she works hard to define her affiliations. Unable to carry the "burden of representation", she rebels against being perceived through the lens of ethnicity leading to her exclusion from American academia. People expect Vivian to be a spokesperson for two causes— feminism and Native American issues— being the most obvious choices. But she would like to be true to herself and decide for herself where her associations lie. This character mirrors all the challenges that Erdrich has faced in her life.

As a brilliant chronicler of native life, Erdrich has consciously worked towards presenting a culturally and mythologically rich legacy of her people. She has tried to break free from harmful stereotypes and cliches that limit the perception of outside world about indigenous people. As a trust building exercise and to prevent damaging representations of their culture, all the covers of international editions of her novels personally approved by her.

To conclude, the prolific oeuvre of Erdrich tries to build a bridge between two very distinct ways of life. Without taking an accusatory tone, she portrays the problematic history

of American colonialization and cautiously bypasses the stereotype of native victimhood. It is obvious that she is respectful of both cultures. Even though the loss of indigenous culture is very close to the surface of her novels, she refrains from taking a political stand. Her characters orbit around the humane and individual concerns of family and identity respectively without veering in the direction of politics.

She has been praised for the portrayal of ‘real’ Indian life and her skill to portray realistic incidents in the Reservations. If we look closely, her stories are about personal survival and artistic continuity. She embodies the core of America’s diverse culture and uses her skills to depict history through the eyes of different generations. In all her books, emphasis is upon those who survive in a difficult world. These thematic pursuits are of relevance to all readers across all races. She employs her power of language and creativity to gracefully heal the wounds of her people. Her universal outlook and aestheticism extend an opportunity to diverse aspects of her culture to come together as a unified force.

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