

Home: The Fulcrum of unity and love in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

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Karen Louise Erdrich is an acclaimed Native American writer and one of the most accomplishing and promising novelist. Her skill in creating and developing fictional characters is the central feature of her success as a versatile writer. Erdrich's North Dakota draws comparison with William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels. The recipient of the 1975 Academy of American Poets Prize and the Best Fiction Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Louise Erdrich has also received numerous awards and prizes. Erdrich confronts the realities of Native American life in the twentieth Century. Her fiction depicts the Anishinaabe culture in which the past is intertwined with the present. Her works often deal with issues concerning the Native Americans. Critics have noted the universality of her themes, the poetic quality of her literary voice, and her engaging authorial presence in her novels.

This study delineates the significance of home which is anchored by women, in association with the family, land and language focusing on the women characters in the novel *Love Medicine*. Family is perceived as a tool to bond one's relationships, an institution to affirm traditions, and a platform to stand together. It is an embodiment of motherhood, love and identity for women. Erdrich exalts women as makers and binders of family and community in the novel *Love Medicine*.

Literature depicts women as being inherently better homemakers and housekeepers than their male counterparts. The concept that women rule the home and bind the members of one's own family - both within and extended. Louise Erdrich focuses on 'Home' wherein women play a significant role as binders of relationships in her novels. The study proves that 'Home' refers to

loving people and loving women in particular for they are the ones to identify bonding in a family. Women remain the fulcrum of love, unity and security.

Home is the epicentre of one's life. One need to belong somewhere and the sense of belongingness is a human emotion so as to be an accepted member of a group-whether it is family, friends or co-workers. Humans tend to have a desire whereat to belong to feel safe is the prime concern. The perception of home brings to mind the image of women who are usually the ones to tightly settle within their families and homes, they are also the ones who contribute mostly to create a home filled with relationships: they take care of the house, children and husband. Women are dominant in the construction of a family to keep the family unit together. One learns to love and care for relationships only through families. Family can be defined as a domestic group of people with some degree of kinship-through blood, marriage or adoption. Given the importance of family relationships in most women's lives, it is not surprising that the family has occupied a central place in feminist theory and reasoned which of why women and land play a prominent role in the making of a healthy family. That is why women in the novels of Louise Erdrich usually do not feel uncertain about what and where their home is.

Louise Erdrich's roots, her family, and land have constituted to almost an unlimited source of inspiration. Whilst Native American literature is mostly about relationships - to the land and language of ancient traditions, western literature praises adventures and journeys to unknown distant countries. To Louise Erdrich herself, one's roots have an immense value. Though an English by origin, she evinced a great interest in acquiring Ojibwemowin, the language spoken by her mother's tribe, for almost twenty years to construct a deep intimacy with the wider family and community. Native American literature is mostly about coming home, in comparison to the mainstream Western literature which praises more the adventurers travels to remote unknown places and searching for a completely new home.

It is important to point out that during the last two centuries, the Native American tribes were made to relocate their homes repeatedly, by the Government. The loss of homeland for the Native American tribes had tragic consequences, as their homeland is usually connected with religion, spirituality, history and therefore traditions of the given tribe. That is why Native American heroism in literature is not based on the courage to leave home and search for the American dream, but on the bravery of fighting to preserve the home in the shape it is supposed to be, according to the traditions and spiritual continuity of the tribe.

For at least the last fifty years, the Native Americans have been trying to rediscover their heritage, cultural continuity and ethnic identity. It had not been possible to rebuild home physically in the traditional homeland, but home has at least been recalled and recreated. Louise Erdrich has contributed much to this: “Just as stories in Native American communities will continue to be created and narrated, their “homes” and identities are fluid and unstable. Erdrich constructs a Native American “home” through her writing.” (Bhabha, qtd in Chang, 139).

Louise Erdrich perceives strongly the need to understand the history to preserve the traditional culture of Chippewa or Ojibwe tribe. To Tanrisal, Home means a supportive environment for its members providing security and defence against the real-life tragedies that take place in historical time. The defending power of home is created by the psychological and the mythological life that is lived within it. And it is not restricted to its biological relatives. Tanrisal claims: “The Native American notion of “family” joins the individuals living together in one house because it includes spiritual kinship as well as clan membership” (71).

This means that within the Native American community, the concept of home is as superior as the concept of one's biological family. This approach is completely different in comparison to the traditional Euro-American culture. In the novel *Love Medicine*, this concept of home is strongly pronounced in the story of Marie Kashpaw's family – her home is full of children, both biological and taken-ins. In the following quotation, Marie's husband Nector Kashpaw recalls their life with their children:

I liked each of our babies, but sometimes I was juggling them from both arms and losing hold. Both Marie and I lost hold. In one year, two died, a boy and a girl baby. There was a long spell of quiet, awful quiet, before the babies showed up everywhere again. They were all over in the house once they started. In the bottoms of cupboards, in the dresser, in the trundles. Lift a blanket and a bundle would howl beneath it. I lost track of which were ours and which Marie had taken in. (LM126)

The concept of home is strongly related to women - the mother is a creator and a home maker. Mothers give identity and a sense of belongingness to their children. This has been the focus of Native American authors to be “interested in the configuration of home, identity and community.

It is really a difficult task, though, for the women to configure the homes as they wish, as the traditional structure of the Native American family has been broken due to the historical events.

In *Love Medicine*, the characters with mixed blood – as Louise Erdrich herself is – struggle the hardest to achieve the task, as their homes were torn apart when they were young, such as June Morrissey or Marie Kashpaw - who, though seemingly a born home creator, has to try really hard to build and maintain their home despite all the troubles of her life. As Tanrisal posits: the mixed bloods occupy a marginal position because they are unwanted by both cultures and therefore ultimately led into isolation. They are torn between two worlds. Being unable to reconcile them, must create a new identity. (69)

Marie Kashpaw succeeds as she is able to create not only the identity of a born Indian mother for herself but also an almost perfect home and supportive background to fulfill the expectations of the community. The unique perception of 'Home' to the Native American is worth mentioning – home is not only a place for the living inhabitants, but also for the dead ones. In fact, Native Americans do not consider the dead as “dead” because they are the spirits of the ancestors and therefore, the dead ones carry the identity and are able to help to create the identity of the living ones. However, they help holding traditional continuity of the culture of the tribe. This attitude to the dead is manifested in Louise Erdrich’s works too where the dead characters do not escape from the stories completely, such as June Morrissey or Nector Kashpaw who keep coming to visit their beloved ones even after their deaths. Furthermore, it is evident that home cannot be understood only in the domestic sense of the word within the Native American community. As Bevis points out: Nature is home (...) Nature is not a secure seclusion one has escaped to, but is the tipi walls expanded, with more and more people chatting around the fire. Nature is filled with events, gods, chickadees, and deer acting as men. Nature is “house” (137) .

Home in Native American culture is both physically and spiritually connected closely to landscape, as the particular landscape is the space where their myths take place and where the spirits of their ancestors live their eternal existences. It is the tradition, though not the place itself, which enable people to feel that they belong somewhere, that their identity is legitimate and secure. The Native Americans oscillate between home and homelessness, because of their history of displacement.

Home, is a place where people live together with their family or other relatives and friends. All the people who live in one particular home also contribute to the perception of home of the other people and of themselves as well. However, the perception of home for Louise

Erdrich takes many dimensions. Another dimension of the same term is the whole area of the North Dakota reservation, which also includes the wild uninhabited parts. On the other hand, the term home may also be understood as something that a mother creates for her children in terms of relationship.

Women in *Love Medicine* are the ones who stay securely with their feet on the Earth, because they are also the ones who give the right feeling of home to the others – to their children and their husbands. They are strong and independent individuals who struggle to create a loving home.

Marie Kashpaw, a complex character whose achievements as a mother and a leader of a household indicate that she is a born Indian mother and a home creator nurtured by a strong mother, where family background was not satisfying as she was born of mixed parents. Thereby she was not able to fit into the reservation. Even her future husband, Nector Kashpaw, does not consider her an 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. (LM63)

At the same time, Marie Kashpaw is not white either. For a smart and ambitious girl, this situation is unbearable because she does not want to end up as a wife of an always drunken white horse-thief and she probably cannot imagine that she will be able to fit in to the Native American world either. She chooses her way of finding a home dedicating her life to God and so choose to live as a nun in a convent. The nuns, on the other hand, perceived her as an Indian, which only encouraged her aspirations more: 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 43)

Marie Kashpaw is willing to do almost anything to fit in the Catholic convent. She is not reluctant to become as pure as she can be; she is not reluctant to pray long hours, and to work hard on her soul. She obeys all the rules and harsh treatments from the violent Sister Leopolda, because Marie believes that Sister Leopolda can help her in getting rid of satanic power:

Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered conversation in the old language of the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians. I was privy to both worlds of his knowledge. I listened to

him, but I had confidence in Leopolda. She was the only one of the bunch he even noticed. (LM46)

Marie Kashpaw longed to get rid of Satan as she believed that once pure, she would become almost saint-like and thus respected and loved by all the Sisters. The word Sister would become less formal then and they would become her true family; she would gain a home – where she belongs, where she can feel safe, which could provide her with identity and security for ever-lasting traditions. Marie's interest in Catholicism, religiosity and spirituality is evident. Her desire to be in the convent for she wanted to be accepted and valued regardless of her lineage. Marie Kashpaw seemed to like the church because prayer is a kind of a great equalizer - she could pray with the best of them, which meant it would be impossible for the nuns to ignore or look down on her even if they are inclined to it. Her conversion to Catholicism is a teenage rebellion. It is often away for the youth to manage one's crisis.

However, apart from these things, Marie Kashpaw is not afraid to cheat a little to get closer to her dream home. Sister Leopolda in a fit of violent fanaticism hurts her palm with a fork but Marie Kashpaw does not hesitate to pretend along with Leopolda that she has stigmata: Leopolda had saved herself with her quick brain. She had witnessed a miracle. She had hid the fork and told to the others. And of course they believed her, because they never knew how Satan came and went or where he took refuge. “Christ has marked me,” I agreed. (LM60) Marie Kashpaw realizes that she is materialistic than she thought: “My skin was dust. Dust my lips. Dust the dirty spoons on the ends of my feet” (LM60). Marie decides not to continue to stay in the convent any more. On her way down the hill, back to the reservation, she meets Nector Kashpaw, an Indian boy who is being educated in mainstream school, and who is in love with an Indian girl – Lulu Lamartine Nanapush. Marie Kashpaw covets Nector Kashpaw and marries him, thus creating a family and a home for herself. Marie Kashpaw immediately changes one prospect of a home to another and she is successful in it. Then onwards, Marie Kashpaw had channels all her energy and can-do attitude into her marriage to make Nector Kashpaw a success. She willed and strategized to make Nector Kashpaw successful. Her power and strength is revealed when she manages to impress Nector Kashpaw's mother too. At the beginning, Marie was cowed by her mother-in-law.

Marie Kashpaw belongs to the unselfish type of mother and wife who leads her household as firmly as a general leads his soldiers to the war. Apart from her own children, she

also takes in orphans from the reservation and loves them, June Morrissey and later her son Lipsha among them. Besides, she helps her own husband to make a decision to become the chairman of the tribe. This means that she still has ambitions – she will never be Saint Marie, but still she can be the wife of the most important man in the reservation and the mother of his children. To Marie Kashpaw, this kind of satisfaction is important for after all, she is a mixed-blood.

Marie's character is thus caught between two paradigms. She does not belong fully to either of them. Her family's tribal identity is to be 'duty' with 'hoe life'. Although raised on the reservation, the Native Americans, part of her blood is the same as the people in the reservation have, but still, she looks uncommonly white and she is known to be a daughter of a white man, a man whose social status is considered so low that even the Native Americans, whose social position in the 1950's is not good, feel that they are above him. And now, Marie, his daughter, is above them. It may seem that even her struggle to keep her home in a perfect order and to take care of all those children is only an attempt to persuade the other people that she is as much an Indian mother and wife as she can be.

However, Marie Kashpaw is not just playing it, she only lets the Native Marie within her to win and lead her life as it is supposed to be led. She loves her children tenderly and truly, yet, she brings them up strictly. Marie Kashpaw recollects one of the moments of bringing up her foster daughter June Morrissey. Even though Marie's conception of home is obviously a house where she can take care of all her children like a hen takes care of her chicks, the Indian self in her also understands the urge that some of her children might want to go to the woods and live outdoors. Thus, even though she loves June Morrissey very much, she lets her take her own path. She is strict and firm but she is not unjust or cruel and when she feels that some of her children need to leave, she lets them leave, though her heart bleeds. Apart from June Morrissey whom Marie Kashpaw permits to go and live with Eli Kashpaw, Marie also enables Lipsha to take her money in order to go find his roots when she feels he might need it.

Marie's heart is as wide as her home that binds relationships. With the same urge, her husband Nector Kashpaw feels to keep in touch with his love and lover Lulu, which in turn makes Marie feel the need and responsibility to take care of all the people who might need her. Her home is always neat and the flowers in her garden bloom in the right way though she is not able to keep her beloved ones from leaving her. First of all, two of her babies die, then June

Morrissey leaves her for Eli Kashpaw. When Nector Kashpaw wants to leave her for his lover Lulu Lamartine, Marie Kashpaw is desperate. However, she does not complain instead she only tries even harder to maintain the warmth and neatness of her family saying:

I never went down on my knees to God or anyone, so maybe washing my floor was an excuse to kneel that night. I felt better, that's all I know, as I scrubbed off the tarnished wax and dirt. I felt better as I recognized myself in the woman who kept her floor clean even when left by her husband. (LM 164)

No good results in the lives of characters who leave Marie Kashpaw, for she protects and cares for the family. June Morrissey dies in a snowstorm after a messy life but still too young, and Nector Kashpaw does not find his happiness with Lulu Lamartine - at the moment he decides to go away from her and Lulu Lamartine also decides to abandon him. Thus, it is not a lucky decision for anybody to leave Marie, because it is not her house, but she personally presents home for her family and also for herself. She does not get lost in her life; no matter what happens to her – she is always confident in the essential issue – where her home is. Though she has no set patterns in running a home, she has unconsciously imbibed the ambience of home from the family where she spent her childhood. As she grows, the woman and mother in her, is able to create a space around her which is full of love and security for all the people. She is not aware of her own strength and achievements, so she always tries hard to keep her house in perfect order-she does not know that the essential entity of her home does not reside in her house but within herself. There are moments when she seems to understand the fact – when looking at her son Gordie Kashpaw and also at her daughter Zelda Kashpaw:

I remembered the year I carried her. It was summer. I sat under the clothesline, breathing quiet so she would move, feeling the hand or foot knock just beneath my heart. We had been in one body then, yet she was a stranger. We were not as close now, yet perhaps I knew her better. (LM122)

Thus, Marie Kashpaw perceives her own body as a home of her yet unborn children. It is her mind and soul that creates home for the children though she does not care much for her children. As Silko points out, not only the homeland but also the storytellers have the power to keep the traditions going and make people feel safe and at home. It is not so simple with Marie. She assays nothing in particular that she makes to maintain the traditions of her tribe, yet her

home is perfect and traditional. To her, it is a home to all children though not biologically related to each other. It is significant to comprehend that it is home that offers a sense of belongingness. She offers a total freedom to both her husband and children. They differ in the concept of 'home'- to them 'home' is more nature-like and less traditional.

Marie Kashpaw forgives her husband Nector Kashpaw, knowing that he abandons Lulu. When Marie and Nector Kashpaw grow old together they move into a home for the elderly and so does Lulu Lamartine. Marie Kashpaw still does not give up her love and jealousy for Nector Kashpaw and tries to bond with him, with the help of special mythological medicine. This special love medicine unfortunately kills Nector Kashpaw but it does not kill his love for both the women-he visits both Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine even after his death. Marie Kashpaw mourns Nector Kashpaw's death, but still, her identity as a home-maker is not disturbed. She continues to be responsible and takes her children, grandchildren and those who need her support. Lulu's stay with their family after surgery is not accidental. Marie Kashpaw is not pleased to understand the suffering of Lulu Lamartine, who is dear to her husband, the people of her tribe. The bonding with Lulu Lamartine becomes strong and Lulu's acceptance is well replicated: "The light was cloudy but I could already see. Marie Kashpaw swayed down like a dim mountain, huge and blurred, the way a mother must look to her just born child"(LM297). Thus, Lulu Lamartine, despite being half-blinded, is able to see something that always escaped her attention. She sees Marie Kashpaw through the reflections of all her children, because from now on, Lulu's is taken under Marie's custody. Lulu Lamartine is finally at home with her. It is not the household, but her magnanimous mind to offer a 'home' to her extended family.

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