

An Eco-feminist Reading of *Love Medicine*

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Abstract—Louise Erdrich is one of the most prolific, important and successful contemporary native American writers. *Love Medicine* is her representative work. And it represents the lives of Chippewa Indians in reservation. This paper aims to analyze traditional Indian women's relationship with nature from the perspective of eco-feminism. Both the Indian women and the living environment in reservation are persecuted by the patriarchy and they are deprived of voice. In men's eyes, women and the nature are just something inferior and attached to them. However, the Indian women don't yield. They unite together and make the best use of their close relationship with nature, rebuilding the harmony between men and women, man and nature, thus gaining more freedom and power and elevating their social status.

Index Terms—*Love Medicine*, eco-feminism, female, nature, harmony

I. INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich, a Native American writer of novels, poetry, and children's books featuring Native American characters and settings, grew up in North Dakota. She earned her B.A. in English of Dartmouth College in 1976. At Johns Hopkins University, in 1979, she acquired her Master of Arts in the Writing Seminars. Actually, she is one of the most prolific and successful contemporary American writers.

Love Medicine, published in 1984, is Louise Erdrich's first novel. In 1984, It won the National Book Critics Award. This novel represents the lives of Chippewa Indian in Turtle Mountain Reservation. The novel begins with June's death on her way back to the reservation. Even though she dies at the very beginning, June holds the novel together. Meanwhile, the Marie-Nector-Lulu's love triangle is also a link in this novel. And each chapter in *Love Medicine* is a vivid tale that stands alone, even though characters who are grandparents in one story are wild youngsters in another story.

Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that combine feminism with ecology. MacGregor (2006) holds that the men's domination of land, a fundamental principle of eco-feminism, has led to a dominator culture, showing itself in food export, over-pasturing, the tragedy of the common people, exploitation of people, and an abusive land, in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. Eco-feminists consider there is a strong parallel line between the women's oppression in society and the nature's degradation. And they also think that women have a closer relationship with nature than men.

Louise Erdrich has the similar standpoints. In *Love Medicine*, the female characters such as Marie and Lulu, have an intimate relationship with nature. This paper aims to analyze the eco-feminist consciousness of female characters in *Love Medicine*.

II. PATRIARCHY—ROOT OF OPPRESSION OF NATURE AND WOMEN

The definition of patriarchy, in the dictionary, is a form of social organization that father is the supreme authority in the household, clan, or tribe and blood lineage is calculated in the male line, with the children belonging to the father's clan or tribe (Mahon, 2011). Actually, patriarchal system is the source of all oppressions. The oppression of nature and women also blame for the patriarchy. Patriarchal system treats nature and women as objects, which brings about the domination and rule. In this system, nature is in the position of having no voice and always is repressed by men at random. Apparently, nature is an appendant in patriarchal system, so are women who are regarded as subordinate too. Women are always described as silent and passive objects that are attached to men.

Since women and nature are dominated by men under the influence of patriarchy, they have been wrecked terribly. In *Love Medicine*, the land and female characters are both persecuted by patriarchy, in other words, patriarchy is the original cause of oppression of nature and women in reservation. The following part will give a detailed analysis.

A. *Deteriorated Environment in Reservation*

The living environment in reservation is gradually deteriorating. When Albertine hears the death of June, she returns to the reservation and she describes the beautiful scenery: "all along the highway that early summer the land was beautiful. The sky stretched bare. Tattered silver windbreaks bounded flat, plowed fields that the government had paid to lie fallow." (Louise, 1993, P11) But when she drives close to reservation, she describes the wild and shabby sights of reservation:

At the end of the big farms and the blowing fields was the reservation. ..Even in the distance you could sense hills from their opposites---pits, dried sloughs, ditches of cattails, potholes and then the water. There would be water in the

hills when there wasn't any on the plains, The highway narrowed off and tangled, then turned to gravel with ruts, holes, and blue alfalfa bunching in the ditches. Small hills reared up. Dogs leaped from nowhere and ran themselves out fiercely. The dust hung thick.

From the depictions, it is easy to find the living environment in reservation is really terrible. Compared with the outside world, reservation is just like a hell.

In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich gives a vivid and exact description of the living situation in reservation. The white replaces farms and pastures in reservation with factories and mines. Fields and air in reservation are heavily polluted, and the rich lands become barren after giving way to factories or mines. The white wants to change Native Americans into farmers and imposes their rules on them. It is not very hard to see this point from the policy of allotment mentioned in *Love Medicine*. As Erdrich states, the land policy in reservation is a joke. In reality, this policy is the cause of the land loss in reservation, and finally their loss of home. This policy intends to congregate the Native Americans in reservation away from encroaching settlers, but it causes considerable sufferings and many deaths. And it is responsible for the Native Americans' more and more serious poverty. The white government nibbles Native Americans' territory and gains a lot of benefits from making use of their land. Before the white came, the Indian reservation was pastoral, picturesque and peaceful; however, the policy destroys the landscape and breakdowns the natural beauty. The white should admit that they do cause serious sabotage to Native Americans' survival areas.

From these sentences, the author of this paper realizes that the policy of allotment has passive effects on Native Americans in reservation, as it terminates their communal possession of property by which they ensure that everyone have a home and a place in reservation. This policy is the climax of Americans' attempting to destroy tribes and open Indian land to put down roots by non-Indians. Also, it imposes a patriarchal nuclear family onto many maternal Native societies, in which property and descent are dominated by women.

B. *Persecuted Women in Reservation*

Androcentrism, which favors men over women, makes women subservient to men. In reservation, women have no freedom and rights, and the status of women is much lower than that of men. Women cannot escape from their tragic fate and they are thought that they should be inferior to men. After the invasion of the whites, Indian women are also affected by the religious persecution of the white.

In *Love Medicine*, many female characters are persecuted by patriarchy, such as June, Marie, Lynette and so on. They are always in the position of having no voice and are described as silent and passive objects that are attached to men.

Love Medicine begins with June's death on her way back to the reservation. Even though she dies at the first chapter, June holds the novel together. In *Love Medicine*, June is a major female character. She is fostered by Great-uncle Eli. He takes her in when June's no-good Morrissey father runs off to a big city. When she grows up to be a adult, she begins a romantic relationship with Gordie. However, their marriage turns out to be an off-and-on marriage and June finally leaves the reservation. When June lives in the white world, she is always ridiculed and treated unequally by the white. She often has no money for foods and doesn't know exactly when she ate last time. Her clothing often itches. She really has a hard life in white world. So when she is ridiculed by a customer just because of her race, she purposely dyes the customer's hair stiff green with chemicals to abreact her anger. After experiencing the failed marriage with Gordie, she also wants to find a good white man to rely on, but the white men she turns to think that "an Indian woman was nothing but an easy night". So she makes up her mind to go back to the reservation. Unfortunately, she is frozen to death in the storm.

Marie is a great mother and wife in the novel. When Marie appears first in *Love Medicine*, she is devoutly pursuing her dream of becoming a Christian saint. Marie imagines the holy scene when she becomes a saint some day: "Plumes of radiance had soldered on me (Marie). No reservation girl had ever prayed so hard. ...And they never thought they'd have a girl from this reservation as a saint they'd have to kneel to." (Louise, 1993, P43) Marie fancies when she becomes a saint, she will be carved in pure gold with ruby lips and people have to stoop down off their high horse to show respect for her. This description fully shows Marie's piety and confidence. However, when she marries Nector, she becomes less and less confident. Her husband, Nector, betrays her. When Marie fags away at supporting family, Nector has an extramarital affair with Lulu. And Nector even wants to abandon her and their children so that he can live with Lulu together. Beyond expectation, Lulu doesn't accept Nector, so he has to return home. Even though Nector does so, Marie still forgives him and does her best to help him to be something big on reservation. Her life is centered on Nector and she is proud of Nector's achievements. She loses herself and all she concentrates on is Nector and everything around him.

Lynette is the wife of King, son of June. She is also a female character persecuted by men's domination. Her life is so hard not because she has a terrible living conditions, but because she is in the position of having no voices in her family. She must obey King and listen to his advices for everything in life. As Erdrich's depicts, Lynette is weary, eyes watery and red. Her tan hair, caught in a stiff club, looks as though it has been used to drag her here. From Lynette's appearance description, it is not very hard to find that Lynette has a life without any motivation. She spends the whole day just for the purpose of keeping alive.

To sum up, all these three female characters are persecuted by patriarchy. An Na (2009) argues that they are dominated by men and have no voice in daily life. The men in reservation just think women as something attached to them. Even though these women sacrifice their whole life to serve men, they still are ignored.

III. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND WOMEN

Cui Tian (2012) thinks that in the progress of a society, women are always the first to notice the negative effects of environmental pollution. Eco-feminists also say that women have a closer relationship with nature than men. This closeness, therefore, makes women more nurturing and regardful of nature. However, this closeness isn't recognized by men. Women's voices are often ignored. Together with women, nature is also viewed as an exploitable resource that is significantly undervalued. Both of them are in the position of being dominated by men. Some eco-feminists gradually realize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women relate to each other closely. And they also believe that women and nature need freedom, respect, care and love.

In *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich also depicts some female characters that have a close relationship with nature. Even though they don't have a happy life under the domination of men they still relate themselves to nature closely. They are proud of their inherent closeness with nature and strive to protect nature.

A. *June's Thirst for Freedom and Equality*

June is frozen to death in the storm when she comes back to the reservation in the first chapter. Even though there is no direct depiction about her, June's desire for freedom and equality still can be felt in *Love Medicine*. Albertine retells June's daring experience in the white society: "When June was studying to be a beautician, I (Albertine) remember, word came that she had purposely burned an unruly customer's hair stiff green with chemicals. And other secretaries didn't like her. She reported drunk for work in dime stores and swaggered out of restaurants where she'd waitressed a week, at the first wisecrack." (Louise, 1993, P9) From these descriptions, it is clear to see June's thirst for freedom and equality. June leaves the reservation to earn her life through her own hard work; obviously she is independent and self-motivated. Being a strong independent woman, she can't bear others treating her unequally just because of her race. So she vents her anger by intentionally dyeing an impolite customer's hair green and stiff with chemicals, being drunk for a work in dime stores and swaggering out restaurants. Being an independent woman, different from other Indian women, June wants freedom and equality on tiptoe, which nature expects too under the domination of human beings.

June has a happy life when she lives with Eli. They suck on pine sap and graze grass and nip buds like a beer. They always have an intimate relationship with nature. They treat nature as their old friends. June thinks that she has a closer relationship with nature than others especially men. In June's eyes, the nature is equal to her, and there is no hierarchy between human and nature.

These vivid descriptions show June is brave and dares to love, protest and hate. However, in the white society, her way of gaining independence turns out to be wrong finally. Being a member of Native Americans, she can not avoid being ridiculed by others, especially the white. After the failure of trying to be independent through her efforts, she wants to try her luck by finding a good man to rely on, but the white men she turns to for dependence consider her as an easy night. She finally loses herself and dies on her way back to reservation.

B. *Lulu's Intimacy with Nature*

Lulu is described as a powerful protector of nature in *Love Medicine*; she is charming and wins Nector's heart. But she falls into love with Moses living along in an island. And she decides to begin a romantic relationship with him regardless of the oppositions of her families. When she goes back to reservation many years later, she has an extramarital affair with Nector and different relationships with different men so that her boys vary greatly in appearances. After being treated unequally, Lulu fights for female's freedom and rights with the other women in reservation together. What's more, Lulu is a strong-minded girl. She loves nature so deeply that she spends her lifetime protecting the land from being destroyed by the white. Her love for nature can be illustrated exactly by her words in *Love Medicine*:

"When I came back to the reservation after my long years gone, I saw the leaves of the poplars applaud high in wind. I saw the ducks barrel down, reaching to the glitter of the slough water. Wind chopped the clouds to rolls that rose and puffed whiter, whiter. Blue June berry, tough diamond willow. I watched my own face float over the grass, traveling alongside me in the dust of the bus window, and I grinned, showed my teeth. They could not cage me anymore." (Louise, 1993, P69)

It is no doubt that Lulu has an intimate relationship with nature from the above sentences in the book. After being separated from nature for so many years, her love for nature is beyond words. She wants to return to the embrace of the nature.

On the other hand, there is another signal of Lulu's love for nature. It is her marriage to Moses. After their marriage, the couple develop a close relationship with nature. For example, they prefer to live in their cave, eat rosehip and raw potatoes. They take a bath in the lake even though the water is freezing. When on the shore, they hug each other for warmth. To some degree, Lulu's love for Moses is another indication of her love for the nature.

Besides these, Lulu holds the opinion that her innate wildness is the cause of her sexual relationship with different men. Lulu Lamartine says in *Love Medicine*, "There were times I let them in just for being part of the world." (Louise, 1993, P273) So she makes love with different men, and her children cannot know their fatherhood clearly. Lulu lives her life in this wild way regardless of rumors about her in the tribe. She confesses frankly: "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 all that lived in its rainy arms." (Louise, 1993, P272) Even though no one comprehends her, Lulu never regrets or minds living her life following her heart.

In a word, Lulu is a representative of outstanding women. Lulu believes that she belongs to nature and opens herself to it both physically and spiritually. She tries to help people who are confronted with loss of land and home, which shows Lulu's affinity with nature. And her sense of embracing nature corresponds to the traditional Indian belief that all things in the nature have interconnection with each other. They can't live alone because they are a unified entirety.

C. *Marie's Feminist Consciousness*

Marie Lazarre is one of the main female characters in *Love Medicine*, and she gives readers with deep impression. Ever since Marie was young, she has been searching for her subjectivity through her striving to be Saint Marie. However, when she realizes the Christian belief is not her Indian religion and will do her no good, she comes to know that it is foolish of her to rely on the white. So she never prays. If she wants something she gets it by herself. She goes to church only to show the old hens they haven't got her down.

Marie is optimistic and loves nature deeply. What is more, Marie is a representative female figure with talents and a strong will. She reflects the innermost world of strong women, who are conscious of the intelligence of themselves. She knows from the beginning that she has married a man with brains. However, she also knows that the brains wouldn't matter unless she keeps her husband, Nector, from the alcohol. And Marie decides that she is going to make her husband into something big on the reservation.

Marie also tries hard to maintain the daily needs of the big family without any complaint. She tries her best to take care of household and handles family affairs well. She is in charge of her family in a good condition without Nector's help. She tries to make butter, pieces quilts, and sews other people's clothes, whatever she can do to get by without Nector. She earns more money than her husband, Nector, later she even provides financial support for him. She shows people that women could have her own life and her own realm in family like men.

Although Marie fails to come into her husband's world, she realizes her desire and power in her own sphere. In her own realm, she releases stress, realizes her potential and talents. She is such a great woman as to be able to unite her enemy Lulu together to fight for the Indian people's right. She takes on the responsibility to revive the whole tribe. Marie is a powerful survivor whose strength is closely connected to nature. It is this strength that allows Marie to gain her confidence in the reservation.

IV. DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHY

To eliminate hierarchies and dismantle the logic of domination of patriarchy is one important task for eco-feminists. Eco-feminists emphasize the relationship between all life forms rather than hierarchies or ranking. For eco-feminists, the deconstruction of patriarchy is in accordance with the essential assumption of traditional women, which clarifies the intimate relation between nature and human. Women determine to unite together to change their fates (Fricker, 2000). They stick at controlling the deteriorating living environment and proposing solutions to the environmental problems. Women and nature, the subordinate other in patriarchy, are also independent like all the other life forms, interconnected with each other in the ecological wholeness. Such ideas of eco-feminists will deconstruct patriarchy.

In *Love Medicine*, the patriarchal domination is deconstructed. To Marie, nature is her soul mate that comforts and empowers her to overcome constraining social structures and win herself social equality with men. Marie respects nature and takes care of nature as her child. Both nature and women realize their creativity and possess great productivity. They have proved that they are the independent self with intrinsic value.

A. *The Sisterhood: The Unity of Lulu and Marie*

Lulu and Marie are two major female characters in *Love Medicine*, especially Marie who not only brings up her own children but also nurtures those who are discarded and homeless. Lulu and Marie are rivals because of their relationship with Nector: one is wife and the other is mistress. What is most surprised is that after Lulu has an operation on her eyes, Marie comes forward to take care of her. They start to communicate, understand and appreciate each other. In the chapter "The Good Tears", Louise Erdrich writes:

I (Lulu) thought her voice was like music in itself, ripe and quiet... I gave her a pillow I'd made out of those foam rubber petals they sell in kits.

"This is real nice," she said, "I never learned how to do this kind of thing."

...

"I appreciate you coming here to help me get my vision," I said. "But the truth is I have no regrets."

"That's all right" ... Her voice had lightened. "There's a pattern of three lines in the wood."

I didn't understand, so she put it another way.

"Somebody had to put the tears into your eyes. (Louise, 1993, P293)

The dialogue depicts a warm picture of Lulu and Marie who help and care about each other even though they were rivals before. After Nector whom they both love deeply dies, they become ally to look after each other and fight against the white government to protect their Native Americans' rights together.

B. *The Harmonious Relationship between Men and Women*

Since the emancipation of women, the relationship between men and women has become more and more harmonious and the values of women have been recognized gradually. The role of women in daily life becomes more and more vital. The female and male gradually live a harmonious life together. They commence helping and appreciating each other. Women gradually are in the position of having voice in society. They begin to wield their rights and power to make a better life with men and nature.

In *Love Medicine*, Lulu helps Moses regain the ability of speaking, walking and living. Before Lulu comes to the island, Moses speaks in the old language and uses words that have been lost for a long time. When Lulu comes to the island, she always tries her best to help Moses regain the ability of living as a normal person. "Lulu turned Moses to the front with her gaze, put his clothes on right. She pulled him into the circle of her arms the way a mother encourages her child to walk. Touch by touch, she took down his grave house. With her kisses, she placed food for living people between his lips. He told her his real name. Not the name that fooled the dead, but the word that harbored his life." (Louise, 1993, P81)

Thanks to Lulu's help, Moses finds his voice again and tries to say something in a whisper. He gradually becomes a normal person with no problems in communication. When Lulu is pregnant, he even visits Nanapush alone, retrieves her clothes and private things. He uses her twelve nickels for clothes, green coffee beans to roast, canned milk, and the peaches she carves. From the Moses's regain of the abilities as a normal person, the women's power is clearly stated. Actually, women start to take a more and more significant role in daily life, such as Marie. Marie handles family affairs alone. She earns money by her own hands to support family. And later she even provides financial support for Nector. Her contributions in Nector's success can't be ignored. Women and men begin to live together in harmony in *Love Medicine*.

V. CONCLUSION

The land and living environment in reservation is deteriorating day by day because of the policy of allotment. Similar with nature, women in reservation are also oppressed. Under the oppression of patriarchy, women in reservation lose themselves and they have no freedom and voice (Sanders, 1998). What they can do is adopting children and handling family affairs. However, women never give up themselves in such terrible situation. They never yield to the power of men under the domination of patriarchy even though they suffer a lot from it. They always keep the thinking of eco-feminism in their minds. They always connect themselves with nature closely and devote themselves to protecting nature. The female characters in *Love Medicine* take a vital role in protecting their home and nature in reservation. At the same time, they also fight for their own freedom and rights. They unite together to fight for it even though some of them were rivals once such as Marie and Lulu. Through their striving, women in reservation have gained rights and can speak their voice loudly. The role they take in tribal society becomes more and more vital. Meanwhile, their relationships with men have been improved and they begin to live together in harmony.

Ecological crisis is a pressing issue besetting the whole world. Eco-feminism centers on the deteriorating environment and exhaustive exploitation. It deems the combination of nature and women, which tells human they should hold together to solve the ecological crisis (Dobscha, 2001). Eco-feminists hope that the men's domination of nature will end, the alienation from nature will be eliminated and finally nature and human beings will live in harmony (Crook, 2012). With the development of eco-feminism, more and more people commence realizing the vital role that women play in protecting environment. Meanwhile humans begin to realize the development of society can't be separated from the harmonious relationship with nature. Humans and nature gradually become a whole and this world become more and more harmonious.

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