

An Ecological Interpretation 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, which represents the lives of Chippewa Indians in reservation and reveals the irreversible and devastating influence on Indian tribes exerted by the white. The Indians suffered a lot and the living environment in reservation are devastated, yet the Indians never 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. This paper analyzes the interdependent and indivisible relationship between the traditional Indians and their lands, so as to reveal Native Americans' ecological awareness and encourage people to think about the causes of the ecological crisis today.

Index Terms—Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*, ecological consciousness, nature, harmony

I. INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich, born in 1954, is universally acknowledged as one of the most important native writers in American Literature. She is one of the most prolific and successful contemporary American writers. Up to now, she has published 13 novels, one short collection, one anthology, etc. North Dakota is Louise Erdrich's birthplace. She is of German American and Chippewa descent. Her tetralogy of Chippewa includes *Love Medicine* (1993), *The Beet Queen* (1996), *Tracks* (1989) and *The Bingo Palace* (1992) together making up a grand family saga, which displays the life of the Indians in North Dakota dispossessed of their land and the subsequent destinies of their following generations.

Among these works mentioned above, her first novel, *Love Medicine* contributes most to her reputation to a great extent. The book published in 1984 won her the National Book Critics Award. *Love Medicine* represents the lives of Chippewa Indian in Turtle Mountain Reservation, talking a lot about home, banishing and returning to homeland, identification and survival. The structure of the novel is a collection of eighteen linked stories related to lots of different characters from 4 families in Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota: the Kashpaws, the Lamartines, the Pillagers and the Morisseys. By the vivid description of the family sagas of four generation of Indians, *Love Medicine* shows Erdrich's well-versed knowledge of Indian traditions and demonstrates the fundamental effect of environment and regional landscape on the construction of identities of the main characters. Consequently, it brings forth the stark differences between the Indian and white culture in interpreting nature.

Native Americans as the earliest inhabitants of the North America were discriminated in the past centuries, and granted citizenship only in 1924. Before the Europeans arrived, they lived in harmony with nature on the continent for a long time and cultivated their own splendid cultures and traditions. However, the academic studies of their ways of life and their interactions with nature have only appeared in recent decades along with the rise of ecological literature. The study of *Love Medicine* in foreign countries started in late 1980s and early 1990s. The Ecological wisdom of *Love Medicine* has attracted the attention of the domestic and foreign scholars. However, a systematic and in-depth research of *Love Medicine* is still in need. Based on previous study, this paper aims at representing the living condition of the Native Americans and interpreting the ecological thoughts in *Love Medicine*. The author of this paper will analyze the destruction of the natural environment in reservation due to the discrimination of the white as well as the indiscernible relations between the traditional Indians and their lands. This paper will shed light on Native American's ecological wisdom and make people reflect the deep reason of the ecological crisis in modern society. By exploring into a different culture, this paper wishes to absorb and disseminate ecological wisdom of the Native people and arouse the awareness of maintaining ecological equilibrium.

II. DETERIORATED LIVING ENVIRONMENT IN RESERVATION

A. Deprivation of Land

To Native Americans, land is something with great meaning and importance, something connecting them between their tribes and family. They do not regard land as a commodity but take it an indispensable part of their life and a symbol of the great nature (Allen, 1991). This attachment to land is the source of sense of belonging. However, since the white arrived, things have changed dramatically. The unwelcome newcomers exerted havoc on Indian tribes. The whites drove the Indians away from their homeland by making a set of policies and treaties for their own benefits. The Native

Americans have been discriminated and oppressed by a government dominated by the white for centuries. They have to try very hard to survive in harsh surroundings. It is impossible for us to fully understand *Love Medicine* without knowing the losses and miseries that Native Americans had suffered in the colonial history.

In 1830, the American government passed the Indian Removal Act which forced Native Americans to move from the fertile east to the barren west. The white wanted more land to spread their faith. They wanted to be the master of the nature. But in the eyes of native people, the land is very closely related to their lives, it is more than just a source of food and a place to build their homes. The white despised the Indians' way of life and the way they use their land, so they tried every possible way to seize land from the American Indians. Then American government reached out their hands to the Great Prairie and built the railway, leaving only a small part of land called "the reservations" for the Native Americans. In *Love Medicine*, Lulu witnesses their miserable experience under the dominance of the white government and complains: "How many times did we move? The Chippewa had started off way on the other side of the five great lakes. How we were shoved out on this lonesome knob of prairie my grandmother used to tell. It is too long a story to get into now" (Erdrich, 1993, p.282). Native Americans suffered a lot for being deprived of land, fortune, culture and even freedom. They even revolted against the U.S. Government, but compared with the mighty force of the government, their fighting back seemed insignificant. And their defeat is inevitable.

In 1871, the Dawes General Allotment Act stipulated the allocation of land to American Indians and changed the Indians' original economic system. But the hidden purpose of U.S. Government behind enacting this act is to take away more land from the Indians by trickery. After distributing the lands that the U.S. Government planned to give to the American Indians, the white kept the rest of the fertile land for sale. Ironically, those land inevitably fell into the hands of the whites. What's more, with the implementation of the act, Indians' societal structure have fallen with it. According to history, between 1887 and 1934, when the Allotment Act finally went into effect, the U.S. government divested Native Americans about 90 million acres or about two thirds of their total holdings. The white government nibbles Native Americans' territory and gains a lot of benefits from making use of their land (Steven, 2000). There are more acts like the ones discussed above, which by appearance seem to be beneficial to the American Indians, while the truth is quite different. There is fraud behind those policies. The American government don't really want to help the American Indians. Their kindness is nothing but a charade. The policy made by the white bring not benefits but destruction to the reservation. As Erdrich states in *Love Medicine*, 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.

Before the white came, the Indian reservation was pastoral, picturesque and peaceful; however, the white policy destroys the landscape and break downs the natural beauty. 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 living environment in reservation is gradually deteriorating. Erdrich gives a vivid description of the living situation in reservation. In *Love Medicine*, when Albertine hears the death of June, she returns to the reservation and 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, p. 11). But when she drives close to reservation and sees the wild, shabby sights of reservation, she changes her tone: "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" (Louise, 1993, p. 11).

The description vividly portrays the worsened living environment of Native Americans. The land of reservation has become barren and dilapidated. Compared with the outside world, the reservation is just like a hell.

B. *Bewildered Native Americans*

According to ecological theory, people's identity and landscape are closely related, especially for native people living in harmony with nature. And through analyzing how a person calls his hometown, we can know what his feeling is for his hometown. In *Love Medicine*, the American Indians talks about their hometown in a tone full of nostalgia and even sadness. The sadness is resulted from the loss of land they suffered. When the character Lulu was at school learning the language of the white, all she thinks about is to go back to the reservation to learn their native language. She finds the language of the white disgusting. She finds the language of the white is full of hypocrisy and lies. And only when she is standing on the land of reservation can she find a sense of belonging:

"I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms. Sometimes I'd look out on my yard and the green leaves would be glowing. I'd see the oil slick on the wing of a grackle, I'd hear the wind rushing, rolling, like the far-off sound of waterfalls. Then I'd open my mouth wide, my cars wide, my heart and I'd let everything inside" (Erdrich, 1993, p. 276).

These words show that only in one's own land can one be completely free and full of strength. Nector is among the first American Indians who have received the white culture. He tries to blend into the world of the white. After graduation, he tries to be an actor or the white's model only to find the fact that to the white "the only interesting Indian is dead, or dying by falling backwards off a horse" (Louise, 1993, p. 124). And finally he goes back to the reservation and becomes a chief. *Love Medicine* begins with June's death on her way back to the reservation. She dies in the very

beginning of the novel. June is also one of those who went to the white world to look for a bright future. She is a charming lady praised as the Indian lady of America. The outside world fascinates her. She worked as a receptionist and then worked at a beauty parlor, but she was discriminated everywhere. After being ridiculed by her customer for her race, she quits her job. She tries very hard to improve her life but fails. Finally she made up her mind to go back to the reservation, but was frozen to death on her way home. Another character Lipsha is brought up in the reservation. He is a contemporary healer of the American Indians, having a magic power of healing by touch. However, under the continual influence of the white's culture, he falls into crisis in belief. He wavers in his faith, having no firm belief of the white culture or the traditional culture. Through account the life story of the Indians, Erdrich discloses the bewilderment and embarrassment of the American Indians caused by loss of land and traditions.

III. ANALYSIS OF ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN *LOVE MEDICINE*

A. *Native Americans' Affinity with Land*

American Indians hold the opinion that all parts of nature is inseparable, believing that all things under heaven are equals. Human beings are just an equal member of the nature. The water, mountain, animals, plants and human beings should not be separated. For traditional Indians, land is their identity, land is their life, so the loss of land results in the loss of self-identity (Gao, 2006). In *Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich describes the painful experience of American Indians due to being separated from their land, and Native people's affinity towards their land is fully revealed. Louise Erdrich also depicts some Indians characters that have a close relationship with nature. Even though they don't have a happy life under the domination of the white they still relate themselves to nature closely. They are proud of their inherent closeness with nature and strive to protect nature. Lulu is described as a powerful protector of nature in the novel. She is tough-minded, holds deep love for nature, and devotes herself to preventing the land from being destroyed by the white government. Lulu, as a child of nature, expresses her love for nature:

"When I (Lulu) 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, p. 69).

From these sentences, it is easy to see that Lulu has an intimate relationship with nature. She wants the freedom and hates to be separated from nature. And she wants to live a life with a close relationship with nature. Marrying Moses also indicates Lulu's love for nature. After getting married, Lulu and Moses have a life with a close relationship with nature. They stay inside his cave day after day, never leaving except to bathe in the lake. They plunge into the freezing water, dizzy, steam flowing down their thighs, and then on the shore they embrace again, twisting like otters. They eat rosehips and cold potatoes. Actually, Lulu's love for Moses, to a certain extent, embodies her love for nature.

In a word, Lulu is a representative of outstanding women. She respects nature, takes care of nature as her child, and tries to help people who are confronted with loss of land and home. In face of the white invasion, Lulu and Marie united together to change their fates, stopping the white from taking away their land. They stick at controlling the deteriorating living environment and proposing solutions to the environmental problems.

Like Lulu, the elder generation of Indians have profound feelings toward their land in spite of the influence of modern gold-worship and utilitarianism, and they believe land is their home and can't be measured by money. They have a firm belief that land will last forever while money burns like tinder, flowing off like water. When the characters in the novel face the brutal fate to be driven out of their home land, some of them commit suicides because they can't endure the great pain; some of them take a little soil from this land, for they will be homeless souls from then on. Their belief that human being is just an equal member of nature also proves their intimacy with the land. The traditional American Indians respect all things on earth; they are not ego-centered; they believe their serene lives are based on the support of lives of other organisms. It pains them to see what the white are doing to their land. What the white people did on the reservation is threatening all members of nature. They poisoned the land and polluted the rivers. Their behaviors are posing a great threat to the American Indians who rely on the nature to survive.

With less and less land left for them, the food problem emerges for the American Indians. And the numbers of animals have reduced so greatly due to white people's irresponsible exploitation of nature that it is no more enough to feed the American Indians. In American Indians' opinion, the whites were abusing and poisoning their mother nature, and there will be consequences. Once the balance of ecology in that area is broken down, the chain effects following it will bring pain and disasters to people who live there.

B. *Native Americans' Kinship with Animals*

American Indians have always shared a common faith that nature should be revered. All creatures under heaven are connected. Creatures are just the same spirits in different forms and human beings are no exception (He, 2011). For example, when American Indian hunts down a bear, he would cry and kiss the head of the bear for forgiveness, calling it brother. In many stories told by the American Indians, the creatures and landscapes coexist in a way as if they are the kin of human beings. In other words, everything in nature is one part of a big family. For instance, the earth is often called the mother and the sun, the father.

In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich depicts a world where traditional Native Americans live harmoniously with creatures of nature. For instance, Lulu is brought up by Nanapush who is a traditional tribal hunter. When Lulu was young, she “buried my face in the cloth of his rough shirt, and breathed the woods smoke and dried ink, the trapper’s musk and sun heated dryness of his old man’s skin.” (Erdrich, 1993, p. 69) Under the influence of Nanapush, Lulu develops her sincere love for animals and nature. What’s more, guided by those principles, Lulu often teaches the young generation the traditional idea about animal of their ancestors. When Lulu sees the picture of buffalo, she reminds the young people to remember: “The four-legged people, once they helped us two-leggeds” (Erdrich, 1993, p. 307). That is what she tries to instill into the minds of the young generation of her tribe.

The numerous rituals of Native Americas before they hunt also prove their respect for the animals. They believe that animals were their food sent by a lenient god. So they will have fast, dance and chant spells before they hunt (Wang, 2014). In *Love Medicine* Hector recalls his feeling when hunting with Eli in the woods:

“Alone in the woods, checking the trapline, I find a wounded animal that hasn’t died well, or worse, it’s still living, so that I have to put it out of its misery. Sometimes it’s only a big bird I only winged. When I do what I have to do, my throat swelled closed sometimes. I touch the suffering bodies like they were killed saints I should handle with gentle reverence” (Erdrich, 1993, p. 66).

From the description, we can feel traditional Indians’ prudent and respectful attitude towards animals when hunting.

In western world prevails the idea that animals are destructible. They have little rights. They are to be slaughtered and harnessed. This ideology is also reflected in western literature. The whites have a lot books describing the behavior of killing wild animals for fun and to show their bravery. While from the perspective of American Indians, this kind of behavior is utterly arrogant and cruel. The insatiable greed of the white people drives them to kill more animal over the capacity of the land, breaking the balance of the local ecological system. This is quite different from traditional American Indians’ hunting style, which is far more merciful and moderate. These two kinds of hunting mode represents two different ideologies. The whites believe in money and goods, they want more and more, their appetite is insatiable. They regard nature as opposing to human beings. This is also reflected in many of their slogans like “conquering nature”. But Native Americans believe that every life including animal, plant and even rock has its own spirit and should be respected.

C. *Harmony as the Characteristic of Native American Culture*

The reason why Native Americans become the research focus of so many scholars is that they have a unique way of life, a harmonious way of living. Their life style seems to be the cure of our environmental problems. Their wisdom of living in harmony with nature has become the source of inspirations to many contemporary writers. Nowadays, many researchers are exploring the theme on ecology, ecological wisdom and living in harmony with nature. More and more people are realizing the inner connection between human beings and everything else on earth, promoting the environment friendly technologies. The old European and North American resource-consuming style of development is not welcome any more. Human beings are forced to get rid of their old lifestyle because environmental problems are becoming more and more severe. This phenomenon of modern society is also reflected in *Love Medicine*. By analyzing the ecological consciousness of the Native Americans, we may find a new way to deal with the environmental crisis that is happening all around the world.

Native Americans differ from Euro-Americans in their attitude toward nature. The Europeans hold the views that wilderness is something they must conquer. When they first set foot on the land of America, they are psychologically hostile to this new environment. However, American Indians always revere the nature. They live in harmony with nature instead of fighting against it. They have the awareness that it is better to cooperate with nature than to do things against nature’s law as the white did. This reverence toward nature is reflected in their numerous ceremonies and rituals in their daily lives. For a very long time, Native Americans lived by agriculture, fishing and hunting. All their daily activities were to interact with nature. In this way, they have created a civilization featuring a harmony with nature. Nature and their culture is closely connected. They use nature as a source of imagination and creation. And the reverence to nature revealed in their daily rituals make their culture a part of nature’s order. Thus harmony becomes the characteristics of American Indian culture. For the traditional American Indians, the biggest difference between them and the modern people are that their love and respect for nature is engraved in their souls and revealed in their various rituals of daily life while we just know it by rote. They have a talent of living harmoniously with nature. In the novel, many characters such as Lulu, Marie, Nector and Lipsha lose themselves in the society of the white. They don’t know who they are and where they belong. Only when they return to the reservation do they finally find their position and inner peace.

Not only do the American Indians live in harmony with nature, they also lead a harmonious life inside their family and community. Lulu and Marie are both important characters in *Love Medicine*. Together they bring up a lot of homeless children. The relationship between Lulu and Marie begins with rivals because they both are in love with the same man Nector. Marie is Nector’s wife while Lulu his mistress. They are rivals and they should hate each other. But after Nector dies they become good friends and help each other. When Lulu has an operation on her eyes, Marie comes to take care of her. “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 was nice, I never learned how to do this kind of thing. I appreciate you coming here to help me get my vision” (Louise, 1993, p. 293). The harmonious relationship between them can be easily

seen from the above sentences. The harmony among tribal community becomes strengthened even when they are being persecuted by the white. Lipsha is brought up by Lulu and Marie. When his magic power of touch fails, he falls into confusion about his belief. Under the instruction of Lulu and Marie he gradually realizes his root is in the reservation and the real power of love medicine lies in love and tolerance handed down from one generation to another within their tribe. In the end of the novel, he forgives his mother June for abandoning him and brings his mother's soul back home. His magical power of touch also comes back. Also, Lulu helps Moses regain the ability of speaking, walking and living. Before Lulu comes to the island, Moses speaks 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. And thanks to Lulu's help, Moses finds his voice again and returns to community as a normal person with no problems in communication.

Actually, in the novel women start to take a more and more significant role in family and community, such as Marie. Marie is a great mother in the reservation; she 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. At the end of the novel, women and men begin to live together in harmony, they commence helping and appreciating each other. And they realize their traditional culture is of vital importance and the prosperity of the community is based on respect, care and love. Retrieving the harmony of between man and nature, between community members is the much emphasized theme of Erdrich's works. Native Americans hold the opinion that individual exists among community and family, thus fully revealing the essence of Native American culture featuring a harmonious coexistence with nature and tribes.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the ecological consciousness of Native Americans in *Love Medicine*. Louise Erdrich depicts the stories of the American Indians trying to save their traditions, culture and land. Through these stories Erdrich tries to awake people to recognize the kinship between human beings and nature. The stories of the main characters in *Love Medicine* prove that there is an umbilical cord between human being and nature and many things on earth are closely connected.

Besides, It can also be seen from *Love Medicine* that ecological feelings of Erdrich is different from nostalgic and pastoral sentiments in Caucasian mainstream literature. When Erdrich depicts their unique landscapes on the reservation, she pays more attention to tribal culture and tradition. Her stress on harmony between man and nature and returning to tradition coincides with modern ecologists who advocate we should keep harmonious interpersonal relationship and live harmoniously with nature in today's pluralistic society.

Ecological crisis is a pressing issue besetting the whole world. In recent years, human beings have experienced a lot of unprecedented natural catastrophes. Our earth has been heavily polluted. Our living conditions are worsening. Humans begin to realize the development of society can't be separated from the harmonious relationship with nature. Many writers and literary critics have realized this ecological crisis and are trying to absorb the ecological wisdom of the Native Americans who are known for their primitive yet harmonious way of life. Through the research, the author finds that the ecological wisdom of Native Americans should be valued and made good use of. In fact, in order to fight the current environmental crisis, one should bear in mind that protecting earth is of priority because it is the base where we build our civilization.

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