

The Plight of Contemporary Native Americans in *Love Medicine*

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Abstract—Louise Erdrich is widely acclaimed as one of the most significant writers of the contemporary Native American literature. Her first novel *Love Medicine* represents the lives of Chippewa Indians on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. This paper intends to give a detailed analysis of the living plight of Native Americans in *Love Medicine* from three perspectives and explores the deep roots of their embarrassment. Also, the paper points out the significance of the existence and preservation of the unique Indian culture under the global multi-cultural background and gives some strategies for the survival of Native Americans.

Index Terms—*Love Medicine*, Louise Erdrich, living plight, survival strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Native American literature has always been an indispensable portion of American literature which boasts a long history and versatile contents. Recently Native American literature has begun to attract attention partly because of the amazing popularity of novel by Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich, who is one of the most prolific and successful Native American writer in the past twenty years. She has gained unprecedented fame among readers and critics for her wonderful “North Dakota Quartets”, that is, *Love Medicine* (1992), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Her other novels like *Tales of Burning Love* (1997), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *Four Souls* (2004), *The Painted Drum* (2005), *The Plague of Doves* (2008) and *Shadow Tag* (2010) are also very wonderful.

In the above mentioned novels, *Love Medicine*, as Erdrich’s first work, could be considered as her masterpiece, which is a collection of stories dealing with some different protagonists in the reserved areas. The novel adopts a storytelling tone featured with conversational and indicative style. *Love Medicine*, which displays the life of Native Americans dispossessed of their land and the subsequent destinies of their following generations, is so popular both at home and abroad that it has won many awards like the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Award for Best Novel of the year and the Janet Kaufman Award for Best First Novel.

Louise reveals the tough living condition of Native Americans under the domination of whites through all her stories. From Louise Erdrich’s vivid portrayal, we can get closer to Native Americans we didn’t know before. This thesis aims to analyze the survival problems of contemporary Native Americans in *Love Medicine* and explore the contributing factors to this plight from different aspects. In addition, the paper also highlights the significance of the existence and preservation of the unique Indian culture under the global multi-cultural background and gives some strategies for the survival of Native Americans.

II. THE PLIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICANS

It is well-known that since the end of the 15th century, the migration of European to America has result in centuries of conflict between old and new societies. Native Americans suffered a lot and have been deprived of many things: land, fortune, culture and even freedom. After the establishment of the U.S.A, their situation is still inferior and tough. Louise Erdrich presents the living plight of Chippewa Indian throughout the novel, and indicates their living plights are mainly caused by deprivation of land, loss of culture and discrimination from the white society.

A. Deprivation of Land

The predicament of Native Americans begins with the loss of land. In these Native people’s eyes, land is not only something that provides them with food, but also something that links them with nature. Compared with American society, land could not be considered as a commodity but a necessary part of their life. In their opinion, land is a valuable gift from the nature, in which a sense of belonging can be found.

However, everything changes greatly after the arrival of the white, who brought terrible damages to Native Americans dramatically. Indians were driven away from their homeland by the white own to a set of unfair policies and treaties at the sacrifice of Indians’ benefits. There is a policy signed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830, which is the Indian Removal Act.

The removal of the Indian tribes from the lands which they now occupy within the limits of the several states and Territories ... is of very high importance to our Union, and may be accomplished on conditions and in a manner to

promote the interest and happiness of those tribes ... The removal of the tribes from the territory which they now inhabit ... would not only shield them from impending ruin, but promote their welfare and happiness. (Mintz, 2000, P.111-112)

These acts stipulated the tribes of southeast and what was then called the old northwest should move to the wilderness west of the Mississippi River. The government forced Native Americans to move from the fertile east to the barren west. In *Love Medicine*, Lulu felt that their miserable fate could never be changed under the control of the white, so she once complained: "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, 1992, P.282) It is recorded that Native Americans were deprived of 90 million acres of their land after the implementation of Allotment Act. According to Dong (2011), Erdrich also points out that the government tries all means to take land from Indians. Using muscle is the last way they may use; instead, they use money to bribe tribal council. As a result, because of the lure of money, inner conflict and clash emerge among Indians. For example, the tribal council decides to build a souvenir factory to produce things like bangle beads and plastic war clubs. Although many people do not agree with decision, they can't do anything. As a senior Native Indian, Lulu does have the right to have a voice: "Every foot and inch you're standing on, even if it's on the top of the highest skyscraper, belongs to the Indians." (Erdrich, 1992, P.221) Although Lulu struggles, she can't change the decision of the council, she can't stop the construction of this factory; she loses land and home forever, for she is just a common Native—her voice is so weak and unnoticeable.

B. *Loss of Culture*

Apart from allotting land, the government also set out to undermine Native Americans' religion and traditions by outlawing the practice of traditional religious ceremonies and by alienating Native American kids from their parents. That is to say, Native Americans are forced to speak English language and learn American culture. The white government set up a law to ask Indians to send their children to schools so that they can accept mainstream education from young ages. In this way, the purpose of assimilation can be realized. Teachers in schools install these Indians the advanced American culture, science and technology and tell them that their own Indian culture is uncivilized, backward and useless today. Receiving such education, Indians exposed to American culture are prone to lose their own cultural identity and become confused in the clash of two societies. Then, gradually, because of the ingressive influence placed on them, these Native Indians are naturally accepting the American culture and become what the white society wants them to be. As a result, the traditions and core values which have passed down from earlier generations will face the peril of elimination because no one can inherit those treasures any more. Flavin (1989) holds that, in *Love Medicine*, Erdrich has emphasizes several times that Uncle Eli is the only one in reservation who can hunt deer by using traps. The young generation has lost not only the ability of archery but also the knowledge of Chippewa vocabulary. Eli is hid by his mother when he is young to avoid being taken by the white school, so he receives no education. That's why he is the only one in the second generation who can't read or write. However, many years have passed, "Eli was still sharp, while grandpa's mind had left us, gone wary and wild." (Erdrich, 1992, P.19) All he gets familiar with is nature and the reservation. He is respected by his family members and neighborhoods, for he is a memorial to the past, living in an old primitive way, and immune to the influence of modern civilization. However, because he can't adapt himself into the changing society, he is living in poverty and solitary, no women want to marry him. He is also a good example to demonstrate that Indians who can't integrate into the white society will sink into loneliness.

Also, Christian church and religion contribute a lot in conquering the Indians. This point is stated concretely in the chapter named "Love Medicine". Lipsha Morrissey is born with a special ability of touch endowed by Shaman, an Indian witch doctor. He can heal people by touching their bodies. When Marie asks him to help her to gain back her husband Nector's love, Lipsha doesn't know how to pray to the Indian God, because he is affected by the Christianity from childhood. Then Lipsha turns to the church for help. He buys two raw turkey hearts and asks for the bishop's blessing but is turned down. Having no other options, he consoles himself that maybe he can bless the turkey hearts as well and gain the mysterious love medicine. Growing up in two different cultures, Lipsha is naturally influenced by them and knows the Nector eats these hearts, he will love her again. But the result is miserable, for Nector is suffocated to death. What a joke! Maybe the cultural clash is not the direct reason leading to his death, but undoubtedly that it is the love medicine that causes this tragedy. The old Chippewa specialty blessed by Christianity God does not have any magic power. Nector and other Indian people are all victims of the conflicts of two religions.

C. *Discrimination from White Society*

Farrell (1998) argues that the last element that contributes to the harsh living conditions is the racial discrimination in white society. In the white's eyes, all the Indian symbols like long hair, furs, archery and hunting are things uncivilized and should be civilized. To achieve this goal, the white government builds many boarding schools and asks Indian children to accept American-style education. However, the fact is that though they have received education in neighborhood schools as the government have required, Indians still have to face intense racial discrimination. Take Nector as an example, he accepts school education from a young age; after graduating from school, he once tries luck in movies but is frustrated by the fact that "death was the extent of Indian acting in the moving theater." (Erdrich, 1992, P.119) He then becomes a model for a white artist. The only thing he needs to do is "stand still" and let the old woman

paint his picture. In the picture, Nector is “jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rocky river. Certain death.” (Erdrich, 1992, P.120) To these white, the only thing about Indians they are interested in is death. When Nector finds that “the greater world was only interested in my doom,” he goes home “on the back of a train” (Erdrich, 1992, P.124). According to Nector’s experience, it can be concluded that the white never view Indians the same as them.

Another case in point is June, the most charming woman in Chippewa Indians’ eyes. June has a pair of long legs and she is praised as “Miss Indian American.” After marrying her cousin Gordie, she leaves the reservation because of dissatisfaction of life there. She tries to make a name in the outside world:

When she was studying to be a beautician, she had purposely burned an unruly customer’s hair stiff green with chemicals. She reported drunk for work in dime stores and swaggered out of restaurants where she’d waitressed a week, at the first wise-crack. Other secretaries did not like her. Sometimes she came back to Gordie and they made the marriage work for a while longer. Then she would leave him again. (Erdrich, 1992, P. 9)

June tries every effort to earn a living but she can’t alter the existing fact of social prejudice on her. Because of her strong self-esteem, she can’t bear others’ discrimination and can’t find her place in the white society. Thing then goes towards sorrow: “As time goes she breaks, little by little, into someone whose shoulders sagged when she thought no one was looking, a woman with long ragged nails and hair always growing from its beauty-parlor cut. Her clothes were full of safety pins and hidden tears.” (Erdrich, 1992, P. 9)

From this description, it is obvious that June has become the one hit down by reality; she loses herself and relies on man to live on. Her initial ambition has broken completely. When she determines to back home, she is lured by a white man with money. They drive to a remote path. She gives herself to him. After the white man fall asleep, June makes a decision. Maybe because she can’t put up with the unfair treatment or unsatisfied life here anymore, maybe because she just misses her family in reservation or maybe because she finally realizes that she can’t make a name here, no matter what the reason is, she decides to go back home right now alone. However, due to her drunkenness and an unusual fierce blizzard, June is frozen to death on her way home. That’s really a sad ending which reflects that the trials of Indians who want to establish themselves in the white society are doomed to end in failure.

III. REASONS FOR THE PLIGHT

There are several different factors leading to these American Indians’ plight in survival.

A. Political Factor

First and foremost lies in the unfair policies made by the white government like the Indian Removal Act and the Allotment Policy. The government intends to turn Indians into farmers and launch its so-called advanced civilization on these Indians. Ironically, millions of Native Indians lose their original home and are forced to move to a much bleaker and remote reservations, starting from scratch. The ultimate goal of American government is to snatch all kinds of resources: forest, river, mineral substance, typically the fertile land and transfer all of these to the hands of themselves. All the things they take into consideration are the benefits and interests regardless of the tough life of the Indians after being deprived of everything.

Albertine, on behalf of Erdrich to some extent, expresses her view on this policy. “The policy of allotment was nothing but a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw as usual how much of reservation was sold to whites and lost forever.”(Erdrich, 1992, P.11) It is quite a sarcasm that the white get tangible profits by robbing and cheating while Indians are still struggling in poverty.

B. Economic Factor

As mentioned before, most of the American Indians are sunken in the gulf of poverty. Louise Erdrich depicts the bleak condition of the present reservation of Native Americans in the first chapter of *Love Medicine*: “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 lay fallow. Everything else is dull tan—the dry ditches, the dying crops, the buildings of towns and farms.” (Erdrich, 1992, p.10)

“Beautiful” used here is ironic which attains a more impressive effect. This description reveals that the reservation the Chippewa living on is nothing but impoverish and lifeless. Although compared with primitive ages, the present living standard of Indians has been improved relatively. Most of them don’t need to fish or hunt to maintain their lives. Modern facilities like cars, televisions, electronic oven and mobile phones have become indispensable parts and facilitate their lives greatly. Erdrich entitles her chapter with the “The Red Convertible”. She intends to say that the Indians and the whites have to contact, that the old way and the new way have to contact, and that the uncivilized and the civilized have to contact, with the help of cars—a symbol of modernization. On the other hand, because of the penetration of white culture and the influence of ever-changing outside world, people in reservation realize the great gap between them and the white. However, they still can not catch the developing pace of the outer world. During the transformation from primitive society to modern industrial society, the average income level of American Indians is much lower than that of the white. Hence, they are usually looked upon down because they have no powerful economy to back them. June leaves reservation is

for nothing else but to make a name and earn money in white world. So the weak economy does do harm to these Indians both physically and mentally.

C. *Cultural Factor*

For generations, Indians are skillful hunters, fishermen and so on. They live on their land, along with woods and rivers, not rich but harmonious. However, since the society and economic structure have been changed dramatically, they have to change their living ways no matter they are willing or not. The old generations stand for tribal Indians, whose number is reducing gradually. At the same time, a kind of urban Indians made up with the young Indians largely has emerged. They neither know how to hunt nor how to fish. Actually, they don't know how to earn a living in tribal ways, having forgotten the traditional tribal culture. So they choose to leave the land they grew up and pursue another living way in white cities. Nector, June and Beverly are among them.

According to Mintz (2000), to Native Americans, the culture and traditions they inherit from earlier generations are the roots of their life, which influence their ways of thinking and doing greatly. However, with the invasion of aggressive American white culture, the Native culture is inevitably eroded gradually. Just imagine if a Native American only speaks English, dresses in an American style and knows nothing about tribal life, how can people recognize him as an Indian? Nothing of him can prove that! In this sense, he is totally assimilated. The question is that currently millions of Indians have been or being assimilated. This fact makes us worry: what culture do these Indians belong to? They are born of Indians but now nothing of them can prove this. Can they say they are Americans? The problem is no one accepts this. How tragic it is when the new generation of Indians lose own cultural identity and stroll between two kinds of culture, finding nowhere to shelter. After losing original habitat and core culture, how do these Native people struggle to live on the land now dominated by others?

Conflicts between Indian culture and the white culture in every aspect have great impact on Indian's doing and thinking. The Indians respect nature and revere spirit while the white view their god as formidable. The Indians pursue freedom and harmony while the white attach more importance to governance and fortune. Erdrich portrays the life of Chippewa under the control of the white who exert both political pressure and religious assimilation. Under such a circumstance, the Chippewa are gradually losing their cultural identity. Lipsha's non-effective love medicine is a valid example to show the obscurity between two cultures: growing in different environment, Lipsha is confused about which spirit he should pray for. That is to say, he even doesn't know which culture he belongs to.

IV. SURVIVAL STRATEGIES FOR NATIVE AMERICANS

After centuries of contact with American whites, Native culture has been marginalized by the white dominant culture and is facing the peril of withering away. Nevertheless, first and foremost, for the most Native Americans, regaining the awareness of their issues is the most important thing to do.

Wang Weimin pointed out that (2011) facing the living plight, Native Indians can exist from generation to generation by adhering to their traditions and culture. One key issue is language. Native Americans are prone to fall silent in daily life and in western literature because of the ingressive English. Another reason for the withering of old Indian language is that nowadays, more than ninety percent of Indian children are adopted in non-Indian families, which will also lead to widespread culture loss. Being adopted in an English-filled environment, these Indian children have no access to their tribal Indian language or their cultural identity. In addition, keeping away from their culture, these Indians will lose encouragement and confidence to handle troubles they have met. By contrast, keeping close with their traditions will definitely give Indians a sense of belonging and fulfillment.

Having suffered a lot and been deprived almost everything from political suppression, Indians should try every effort to gain the rights they deserve. The Declaration of Independence writes that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with unalienable rights, that they are among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, the fact is that in America, only whites can enjoy these fascinating rights while Indians are left with poverty, oppression and discrimination, all of these are breaching of the law. So it's time for Native Americans to stand out, scream for their sake and strive for their rights the government owes them. In the novel, "Lyman's Luck" serves as a kind of ending of the "Tomahawk Factory". In this chapter, after being close to Native American culture and learning from the failed trial in the mainstream society, Lyman realizes what the government has done to Native Americans and advises his counterparts to take actions. He says:

They gave you worthless land to start with and then they chopped it out from under your feet. They took your kids away and stuffed the English language in their mouths. They sent your brother to hell, they shipped him back fried. They sold your booze for furs and then told you not to drink...It was time, high past time the Indians smarten up and started using the only leverage they had—federal law.(Erdrich, 1992, P.326)

Lyman's words reveal that the thought of Indians' rebellion and self-protection have emerged. Although their factory is closed finally, it doesn't mean that their rebellious spirit will fade. As long as they keep bearing this spirit and strive for equality consistently, the Indians' living situation will be improved gradually.

In the process of dominating Native Americans, the white always hold that Indians are inferior to them. Hu Mengdie (2010) noted that Native American stereotype is prevailing among white society and also a key component of existing racism. So, to improve their social status and their living condition, Indians need to break this stereotype. In addition to the efforts to arouse the awareness of tradition and strive for the rights they reserve, Indians also need to identify them by other groups in the society that they are equal with the white, not inferior definitely.

To a great extent, by describing Native American's life, Erdrich has aroused much attention to the condition of Native Americans both at home and abroad. Pastore (2009) argued that only if more and more people concern about Native issues can Native people acquire more rights and opportunities to overcome their plight.

V. CONCLUSION

He Ling(2011) pointed out that as a prolific and prestigious Native American writer, Louise Erdrich takes the full use of her mixed blood identity to vividly describe the tough lives of Native Americans in and off their reservation. According to her portrayal, we readers can really feel the tough living conditions of contemporary Indians and can find the deep roots of their plights. Erdrich herself has admitted that your ethnic background is a shaping force of your existence, which you can't simply wake away from. Naturally, she has been a spokesman of Indians and their culture. Instead of writing directly about the Native American experience from a sharp aspect, she chooses to focus on the family connection, tribal relationship and trivial things in daily life of Native people.

Against the backdrop of multiculturalism in the world, a quest for cultural identity has been a prevailing theme. Under this circumstance, the notion of Erdrich's mixed blood identity in Native American literature has aroused the interests in the field of ethnic literature both in U.S. and in China. Thus, it serves as a distinguished example for other ethnic groups on how to survive in this complicated and multi-cultural environment. By writing and publishing this novel *Love Medicine*, Erdrich expresses her own concern and advises over this issue in the ever-changing world.

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