

PORTRAYAL OF NEW WOMAN IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *LOVE MEDICINE*

K. MANJU KUMARI¹ & T.K HEMALATHA²

¹ Research Scholar, Nirmala College for Women, Redfield's, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

² Associate Professor, Nirmala College for Women, Redfield's, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Karen Louise Erdrich is one of the most important Native American writers of the past twenty years. She is best known, however, for her stories and novels. Erdrich novels people multigenerational group of men and women of white, Indian and mixed -blood heritage. *Love Medicine* is a series of stories that appeared as a novel in 1984, which narrates the stories of several families living in North Dakota Ojibwe Reservation.

KEYWORDS: Power, Identity, Empowerment, Courage, Fortitude and Reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

Marie Kashpaw is a bewildering mixture of toughness and compassion. She is accorded with much power and authority. She is the daughter of Pauline and Napoleon Morrissey and is orphaned by her parents. Pauline discovers that she is pregnant and decides to abort the child, while her sister-in-law, Bernadette Morrissey, prevents her from doing it. She is forced to deliver Marie. Pauline abandons the child and who is later raised by Sophie Lazarre in the reservation convent. Deprived of motherly love Marie battles with her spiritual mother, sister Leopolda who is none other than Pauline herself however, she seeks for her identity right from her childhood and the first attempt was made through her identification with the Virgin Mary as an object of worship at the convent. Marie leans towards Catholicism because of her intense devotion to Virgin Mary. She identifies herself with Mother Mary, the Mother of the Universe

Her desire to be a Saint is because to her sainthood is associated with power and strength. She envisions herself as St .Marie and thus creates an identity for herself. Erdrich writes,

I was rippling gold. My breasts were bare and my nipples flashed and winked. Diamonds tipped them. I could walk through panes of glass. I could walk through windows. I closed my eyes .I expected to see blackness. Peace .But instead the vision reared up again. My chest was still tipped with diamonds. I was walking through windows. (LM 54, 55)

The power which Marie envisions an outcome of her triumphant conquest of Sister Leopolda. Her vision of being worshipped vouches for her deepest dream come true,

My skin was turning to beaten gold. It was coming quicker than I thought. So strange I can hardly tell it for delight at the remembrance. For when I came around this was actually taking place. I was being worshipped. I had somehow gained the altar of a Saint. (LM 56.57)

Thus Marie's vision of herself as a statue of Virgin Mary discloses her adaptation of the dominant culture and underscores the derogation of her own heritage. As a girl Marie feels proud that she looks White and denies her own heritage only to embrace the dominant culture because for Marie, Virgin Mary represents power.

Erdrich reveals Marie's lack of faith in God. Marie's fervour is less love for the Almighty God than it is a battle between hatred she feels for and the love she seeks from Sister Leopolda. The impression of the fork in her palm, gains the stigmata that grants her the identity for which she has always longed for: "I couldn't tell why they were praying to me. But I'll tell you this it seemed entirely natural .It was me. I lifted up my hand as in my dream. It was completely limp with sacredness. (LM58)"

Marie gains power and the lost sense of identity in the struggle with Sister Leopolda. Because the nuns in the convent read Marie's wound in the palm, as a God-induced stigmata which Erdrich establishes it as her wound of physical battle rather than a spiritual quest. Marie's search for an identity takes its first step through her path to canonization although it does not last long. The scar is not a sign from God but the outcome of her fight with Sister Leopolda and her quest for a sense of selfhood.

Marie abandons her dream of becoming a Saint and being worshipped and flees from the convent: "Rise up! I thought .Rise up and walk! There is no limit to the dust! (LM60)" To Marie Dust is associated not only with death but also with Sister Leopolda because that life in the convent with Sister Leopolda is deprived of love. This propels Marie to reject the convent and move on to a new stage in her search for health and identity.

As Marie departs from the convent with her head and wounded hand wrapped in torn linen she encounters sexual relationship with Nector Kashpaw, eventually leading to the loss of her identification with Virgin Mary paving way to a new identity as the wife of Nector Kashpaw, the tribal chairman.

Since female power is no longer viable in the Native American culture, Marie's new identity comes not through herself but through Nector. Marie seeks and loses power throughout the novel, yet she does not remain powerless. She is thus portrayed as a powerful survivor. Eventually her marriage with Nector brings a sense of pride because she gains a new status in the community.

Marie is thus empowered. As a young girl, she gains power through religion; she grows to be more powerful as the wife of the tribal Chairman and later as a mother. Erdrich points:

I'd known from the beginning I had married a man with brains. But the brains wouldn't matter unless I kept him from the bottle. He would pour them down the drain, where his liquor went, unless I stopped the holes, wore him out, dragged him back each time he drank, and tied him to the bed with strong ropes. I had decided I was going to make him into something big on this reservation (LM89).

Although Nector is a tribe's chairman, it is Marie the powerful woman behind him for his victory. She directs his life and through him the tribe as a whole. As truly Julie Barak comments, "Marie Kashpaw is a manly - hearted woman, too. She has spiralled high- economically and socially by marrying Nector Kashpaw and has become strong personality. Marie Kashpaw as a powerful mother of seven children adopts two more children to make up for the loss of her two children. She also adopts her sister's daughter, June who is left motherless. Thus Marie's nature as a strong, self willed, confident mother is evident.

Marie chisels her own identity gradually posing herself as a strong and respected matriarch. She is aware of this identity and draws strength from her pride in what she has become. When she goes to visit the dying nun Sister Leopolda who had known Marie in her youth, finds her confident. Erdrich writes "by now I was solid class. Nector was tribal chairman. My children were well behaved and they were educated too". (LM148).

After her return from the convent Marie discovers Nector's letter where he admits to have true love for Lulu. As Marie contemplates on a life without Nector, she projects herself as confident and courageous: "I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ended up as the wife of the Chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I'd still be Marie .Marie, star of the Sea! I'd shine when they stripped off the wax. (LM 165)" No matter what Marie is, a woman of substance.

Marie is matured to accept a new and an independent life without Nector Kashpaw. She moves from being dependent to independent. The new Marie, whose new identity as a free individual articulates her selfhood. She succeeds in her struggle throughout the novel, *Love Medicine*, steadily and gradually reinforces her power. The 'New Woman' Marie is free of all clutches and is autonomous with a room for her.

Nector Kashpaw becomes feeble-minded at his old age despite knowing that he still loves Lulu. After the death of Nector, she again takes up strains in life with such courage and fortitude. Later, Nector's death unites the two women Marie and Lulu who was rivals one finds bonding in them. Lulu Nanapush undergoes an eye surgery and is taken care by Marie in her old age. Marie becomes Lulu's caretaker, where Lulu contemplates.

It was enough just to sit there without words. We mourned him the same way together. That was the point. It was enough. For the first time I saw exactly how another woman felt and it gave me deep comfort, surprising. (LM297)

Thus they form a new relationship as they take solace in each other. Marie arrives at yet another new identity in her life. Marie Kashpaw reconciliation with Lulu Lamartine takes her beyond an ordinary wife and a mother. She is unsurpassed.

Marie's journey leads her to a clear sense of identity. She stands tall and unparalleled. The love she has for her husband is beyond the love she has for her children and herself. Through her selfless and untiring effort, she creates a niche for herself.

CONCLUSIONS

Marie stands tall and unparalleled. Her journey leads to a clear path of new women. Through her selfless and untiring effort Marie creates a niche for herself.

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