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“Unquestioning belongingness”: an analysis of Love Medicine, a novel by Louise Erdrich

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Abstract

Native American Renaissance marked a fundamental step in Anglo-American studies, since it permitted the representation and spread of a culture that for decades had been undervalued and oppressed. The novel *Love Medicine* (1984), written by Chippewa-member Louise Erdrich, brings to an extended audience a structure based on the expression of the storyline by multiple voices. The story, that won great acclaim in its context, expresses key aspects of the North Dakota reservation and the people who still maintain their community alive.

This thesis starts with a chronological history of Native American experience from the ‘discovery’ to the Native American Renaissance, passing through the tragic genocide, necessary to understand deeply the historical trauma of traditional populations. The harsh past brought to a desire of rebirth and reaffirmation of Indian culture through literature. In particular, the great example of *Love Medicine* embodies characterizing elements such as the importance of memory and the desire of belongingness to a solid community in finding one’s identity. The sense of connection and union are recurring aspects researched by the members of the families in the narration. Moreover, this work explores the themes of religion, spirituality and the female roles through characters’ lives.

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Introduction

Love Medicine (1984) by Louise Erdrich is a novel that appears in the American context of the 80s as a representation of the interconnected lives of Native American descents. In order to fully understand the story's complexity an analysis of the history of Native American is needed, crossing the tragic genocide and expropriation which they were object of. Native American populations comprehend a multitude of different cultures that occupied a lot of territories of what nowadays the U.S. is. These populations that left tracks of their existence have struggled to be recognized due to the strong oppressions caused by the European settlers during the past two centuries. Indeed, a body of work like *Love Medicine* encourages readers to rethink the history of the U.S. focusing on the post-modern era. During these times, populations like the Chippewa one, long for the creation of a bridge between their ancestral past and the present society they are born in. Native American Renaissance offers the opportunity to convey this deep desire through literary works, which gain recognitions and spread knowledge about the matter worldwide.

Specifically, *Love Medicine* focuses on the interrelated stories of the characters in the North Dakota context, depicting Native Americans through their life experiences, emotions, and struggles to find their place in the reservation. Discovering and creating one's identity is a central matter of the novel, always paired with the strong and unquestioning sense of belongingness to a culture. The in-depth analysis of the characters encourages the audience to see Indigenous people from a new perspective, especially as unique individuals with personal life stories and social challenges, rather than a indistinctive population. Many aspects of the Chippewa landscape derive from Louise Erdrich's personal experience linked to the Native American population. The most outstanding feature that the author uses is the traditional way of storytelling. Erdrich construct the plot on twenty chapters, narrated by different voices: she

creates a mosaic-like narration where all characters find themselves linked to one another by kinship, love, relationship and friendship.

The theme of belongingness is explored in the present thesis through central themes of the novel and Native American culture: the female role and its evolution through social and historical changes, the relationship between Ojibwe spirituality and the relationship with Christian religion, and the importance of cultural memory in the process of constructing a resilient identity and finding a way back to the authentic essence of Native America, in order to balance the ancestral soul with the modern American spirit. Specifically, belongingness results an unquestioning element that each individual embodies, both from a cultural and spiritual point of view. This thesis aims to underline the importance of the recognition of this crucial aspect of our lives. In particular, the analysis of the social cohesion and struggles within the Ojibwe community is a matter that highlights the undeniable sense of being part of group in a highly-fragmentated context full of cultural insecurities. The expression reported in the thesis' title "unquestioning belongingness" which represents the core element that connects the whole work, pertains to a quote from *Love Medicine's* chapter titled "Lulu's Boys":

Clearly they were of one soul. Handsome, rangy, wildly various, they were bound to be in total loyalty, not by oath but by the simple, unquestioning belongingness of part of one organism¹.

The description made by Lulu Lamartine (one of the plot's main characters) of her sons mirrors the relationship that exists also in the reservation context: despite individual singularities and differences, a special loyalty to the Ojibwe culture is undeniable in finding one's identity and creating one's life path.

1 Erdrich 2004, pp.118

1 Native Americans: from the origins to the literature renaissance

1.1 Native culture, placement, main ethnic groups and “discovery”

The history and the literature of the first inhabitants of the United States starts way before the conquest of America (the so-called “discovery”) happened in 1492. In fact, the territory was populated by hundreds of Indigenous communities, each one with its particular culture, literature and traditions. Many groups were distinguished in the post colonialism era: North Americans Natives (referring to Navajo, Iroquois, Cherokee, Sioux) add up to several culturally-diverse indigenous communities living in central and southern America. This distinction nowadays permits to underline the existence and persistence of these groups that still live in the American territory, in spite of a tragic series of oppressions, genocides and impositions. Most of them had to compromise with a new society that developed in the same territories, creating a melting pot that involves different cultures.

In order to be able to fully understand in depth the Indigenous traits we need to invert perspectives. There is a strong need to “rethink the myth that Indian lands were free lands and that genocide was a justifiable means to a glorious end”¹. In fact, for decades the colonialists convinced themselves and Europeans in general that the land was made for their settling and they had the “duty” to use that to create their empire and develop the American Dream, even if it meant destroying entire communities of Native Americans. Moreover, studying the historical events through

¹ Veronica E. Velarde Tiller, PhD, Jicarilla Apache author, historian, and publisher of Tiller's Guide to Indian Country. Quote from Dumbar-Ortiz, 2021.

Indigenous people's eyes gives us a more accurate perspective of how their lives actually were.

The very first narration of the meeting with Indigenous people and the first description was made by Italian explorer and navigator Cristopher Columbus in his voyage journal, calling the American inhabitants "Indios" (since he was convinced to be in India), and describing them as simple yet beautiful creatures, primitives and willing to be submitted to Europeans. But Natives were basically the opposite of this simplistic vision, used just to achieve the conquerors own interests of expansion.

First of all, Native Americans are often categorized as just one big social and sometimes "primitive" group that lived in the U.S. before the conquest. However, this ethnocentric point of view is misleading in a process of discovering the actual characteristics of each community that lived in the territory. Every Indigenous group, before the 15th century, developed a social and economic system according to their needs and geographical position, on top of a set of beliefs, traditions and oral literature. As of agriculture, corn was a characterizing element that many Native tribes (especially in the Southern part of the U.S.) shared. Its cultivation was essential to those populations, who mastered specific techniques to preserve it in the land over decades. Moreover, corn was considered by Native people as sacred and God-given: this shows the influence that this food had on their culture and religion too. This type of agriculture was at the basis of many Indigenous groups, especially in Mexico and the Southern part of the U.S.. However, corn was definitely not the only element of Indigenous' cultivation. In fact in the large American territory, populations have been able to construct a whole hydraulic system for agriculture, in particular tomatoes, potatoes, cotton, cocoa, tobacco. This is a clear proof of the ability of creating civilized cities and strong communities, an idea that wasn't properly conveyed in the Old Continent during the period of conquest. A great example of it was the big Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, in the center of modern Mexico, founded in 1325: it was considered the center of the Earth and was the site

where the greatest pyramids and palaces were created. Its importance was also recognized by the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés, before he completely destroyed most of the city, with the first big genocide that killed more than 100,000 inhabitants and taking control over the Aztec Empire. This tragic event marked the beginning of a series of destructions of various communities that has always characterized the American land since 1492. In the beginning, the narration told by Europeans aimed to justify their actions using a “good” reason: convert them to Christianity and complete the mission to convert the whole globe to what was considered the only correct religion. But over the decades, the admission of destruction of the life in America was inevitable, due to the uncountable number of deaths, rapes and exploitation that conquistadores caused. We can analyze and comprehend the reasons behind this brutal human behavior that marked American history by underlining the fact that the conquerors, finding themselves in an unexplored land, far away from the center of power and the crown that controlled them in Europe, thought that they had the possibility to act without the control of any type of rules nor institution. Their unstoppable rapes, murders and abuses show a cruelty that is hardly understandable rationally and it’s almost impossible to really define how it could happen. Without any doubt, during that period the army of European conquerors emerged their most strong and uncontrolled cruelty in a situation where they felt like Gods, pretending to the point of convincing themselves that they had the right to that type of destruction just because they had the physical possibility to do so. Also, they had weapons² and mind strategies that most of the times were unknown by Indigenous populations, who were unexpectedly murdered. On top of that, the lack of respect, empathy and interest to create a partial communication and interaction with the American inhabitants was at the basis of the contacts that happened during the 15th and 16th century.

2 Weapons used by the conquerors were modern (i.e. firearms), but another involuntary and defining weapon that contributed to numerous Native Americans’ death were illnesses (such as Smallpox) that Europeans brought to America, where Indigenous people didn’t have the adequate immune system to fight it.

European conquerors wrote many books and texts regarding the first meetings with Native tribes, being able to communicate what they experienced from their point of view and keeping their own flaws and sins hidden. These narratives spread and flourished during the decades in European literature, without ever finding any response from the Indigenous people: their culture was essentially oral and, at the time, unknown by Europeans. Moreover, during the first contacts and also in further moments of relation between Europeans and Native Americans, both parties have always felt fear and insecurity for the deep difference between cultures. However, the contact brought to mix and reciprocal assimilation of the other culture, especially by Natives, due to colonial politics. Native tribes passed the memories of the first contacts with the conquerors through narratives based on recalled dreams, prophecies and premonitions. This powerful oral literature within each tribe conveyed messages, especially against the brutality of the strangers who were oppressing their communities. In fact, Europeans were not seen as gods by Indigenous people, but rather quite weak people who needed help in surviving in the New World. Native tribes helped them with food, guides, and their technologies useful to travel in the territory. After the beginning of the genocide, the stories told by the Natives became prophecies and premonitions about the tragedy that was expecting them. Orality became fragile from the moment when Europeans started the genocide that made not only the people but also a significant part of their culture disappear. Orality was kept alive by their voices, but the killing of hundreds of people caused with time the loss of several traditions and significant part of culture.

The gender role was another aspect that shows the different way of living among the tribal communities in North America and the contrast with European society, especially in the Pre-Columbus Era, when these populations weren't influenced by external impositions such as patriarchy and oppressions. In many Indigenous populations there was a distinction of tasks for males and females. Usually, men would occupy the hunting and the use of weapons whereas women would collect food

from the vegetation and cook for their family. However, the tasks could be exchanged as both genders were educated for all them. Moreover, motherhood was the most important role that a woman could have. Rite of passage were fundamental moments for girls in several societies, where they could gain power and privilege once they reached puberty. Overall, equity between genders was common in most communities such as Ojibwe, Apache and Navajo. Especially in the Navajo culture, the female figure was central and emphasized in many narrations linked to motherhood and creation of life. In Navajo culture (in the traditional society before the stock reduction) women held a high status, which every girl would reach after the ritual puberty ceremony. The importance of women is represented and highly celebrated with the religious figure of the 'Changing Woman'. Her role would combine nurturant and protective duties as well as economic and political honors.

Another characterizing aspect of tribal communities was their special connection to the land, which was compromised by the arrival of Europeans and completely destroyed with the imposed removal. The land is the core of almost all American communities' belief system and spirituality. The earth was considered sacred and the origin of life. Their beliefs were based on the fact that every Indigenous person comes from the earth so no one can own it through property, a system that was destroyed with colonization. The land was connected to people, culture, traditions and spirituality of the community. The place where they created their life was interconnected in all its elements (plants, water, sky, animals) creating a sacred balance. For this reason, people do not simply occupy a territory, but they constantly participate in its life taking care of it. The introduction of ownership in those lands, removal and relocation of Natives from their ancestral lands caused a loss of that special connection, that made their descendants go through many challenges in order to reestablish their culture and transmit their beliefs through generations.

1.2 History of a genocide: Jefferson's program, Jackson's politics and The Trail of Tears

After the discovery, European colonization continued over the decades to be based on exploitation of the American resources, creating a larger system of trade and cultural destruction. After many years of wars and chaos, at the end of the 18th century the Founding Fathers decided to unify the Thirteen British Colonies and declare independence from the English Crown, with the goal of creating a powerful and emancipated Nation based on federalism. The nation was born with a strong contradiction: the Constitution of the United States signed in 1789. On the bright side the document aimed for independence and power to the U.S.A. and claimed equality and freedom among all citizens. However, the down side of it was the exclusion from fundamental human rights of minorities such as women, Natives and Black people. These groups weren't considered citizens so the oppression that privileged people made was justified with the purpose of creating a successful and impeccable nation. The contradiction is clearly shown by the avoidance of permitting all humans in the American territory to have equal rights.

A significant figure of that period was Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), one of the politicians who signed the Declaration of Independence, governor of Virginia and third President of the U.S.A.. His influence in politics was crucial in determining the conditions and treatment that white people had towards Blacks and Natives. In many written texts Jefferson explained his thoughts on races: he claimed physical and intellectual inferiority of Black people compared to whites, using pseudo-scientific theories to support his racist view on the matter. For this reason, he justified slavery in the State of Virginia and the total exclusion of minorities in laws. As for Native Americans, the politician stated that they were still in a primitive state of evolution and inferior, not yet mature as society and individuals compared to white people. In particular, in the text *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson argues his 'progressive' thinking, using human actions and intellect to accomplish a successful

evolution; territorial expansion, conferring to colonists right to property over lands and autonomy are the ultimate goals of his project. In this program of colonization, Native communities have been the main victims. To Jefferson, Natives, who were organized in autonomous nations, were an issue as their ‘primitive’ and ‘underdeveloped’ state represented a limit in the moral progress and economic development of the Nation. Jefferson’s solution was to civilize all Indigenous people and settle them in order to facilitate the colonization of the lands. In his writing the governor explains that, unlike Blacks, Native people could be assimilated in white culture and have the potentiality to study and to learn his culture, since they had a sense of morality. He recognized in them a “race” equal to the European one, with the potentiality to evolve. However, his ethnocentric and progressivist thinking excluded the possibility to accept and respect Indigenous culture as it was, with its own independent progress and values, claiming that European culture was the only possibility. Indeed, Jefferson’s goal was to own ancestral Native lands under the nation’s property, make its inhabitants part of the society by making them workers, teaching them English and new rules to follow. As a matter of fact, “In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Andrew Jackson, a young political leader in Tennessee: the government should advise the Indians to sell their “useless” forests and become farmers.”³. The use of the term ‘useless’ is the proof of the view that Jefferson had on Indigenous culture: worthless and inferior, in need to become “civilized”.

Andrew Jackson (1767-1845), seventh President of the United States, was arguably the figure who most oppressed Native tribes in North America. Despite his democratic thinking and the improvement he brought to American administrations and politics, his expansionist program had terrible consequences on Indigenous communities. From his point of view Natives couldn’t live within white society, contrary to Jefferson’s ideals. Jackson started occupying Indians’ territories in

3 Takaki 2008, pp. 106.

Mississippi, negotiating and buying lands from the Chickasaw people, right before continuing the killings and occupation in the Creeks' territory. His expansion was brutal and reckless, and his murders were covered by "moral" justifications:

The fiends ... will no longer murder our women and children, or disturb the quiet of our borders.... They have disappeared from the face of the Earth. In their places a new generation will arise who will know their duties better⁴.

Moreover, after becoming president he would encourage states to take control over Indigenous lands, even without appropriate treaties, by limiting the intervention by the federal government. So, States started to allow settlers to cultivate and oppress Native tribes, thanks to internal laws. For instance, the State of Georgia was violating Cherokees' rights of self-government and independence in their land. Jackson's purpose was completing an Indian removal from most of their original territories, through violence. The lands where Native tribes would be confined were West of Mississippi, limited in a reservation fully separated from white society. Jackson's abuse of power brought to a law called 'Indian Removal Act' (1830), surpassing Native Americans' rights and forcing a relocation of them all. The president claimed that Indians would be relocated voluntarily and through a protection of their people in order to be approved by the Congress. However, the violent and oppressive nature of the removal is clear as shown by the strong connection that Native tribes had with the lands from which they were uprooted and by the evidence of the numerous killings during that period. In Jackson's mind his actions couldn't be blamed, as they aimed at civilization and progress of the United States, promoting the building of new farms and cities. All his program wouldn't even consider the incredible loss of a complex system of traditions and culture that was living and evolving in its own way inside the Indigenous communities. In fact, during his presidency, Jackson moved thousands of Natives from their homeland to West of the Mississippi River.

4 Takaki 2008, pp. 107.

The biggest removal event, called ‘Trail of Tears’, took place during the 1830s involving five major tribal Nations: Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole. A total of 15.000 individuals were forced by the will of president Jackson on a 5 thousand miles walk to leave their sacred homelands in order to reach the reservation of Indian territory west of the Mississippi River. They left the central southern territories (nowadays Oklahoma), dragged out from their houses by soldiers without being able to take anything with them on the deadly march until the frozen river. The lack of humanity and respect invaded Natives life in the most tragic event that left a trauma in the following generations. Native tribes, who set their families in those lands for decades, couldn't rebel against the extreme violence which separated them from their homelands. The description given by a member of Cherokee Nation explains what was happening to them during the removal:

We are now about to take our final leave and kind farewell to our Native land the country that the Great Spirit gave our Fathers. We are on the eve of leaving that Country that gave us birth.... It is with [sorrow] that we are forced by the authority of the white man to quit the scenes of our childhood.⁵

The ‘Trail of Tears’ happened during a dead winter, caused sickness amongst many people and the death of more than 4000 people. Children, elders, men and women were all walking westward, watching their people dying in silence and crying every step of the way. The Cherokee deportation, which killed about one-fourth of its population, is one of the most controversial and traumatic events in U.S. history. In particular, the removal from the land was inhumane if we consider their belief system: especially early Cherokees’ generations had a deep spiritual connection with nature and its creatures. They felt a significant connection between all the elements surrounding them and moreover they would exploit the environment carefully (being thankful for the resources and apologizing for hunting activities). Indeed, their community life, rituals and traditions are deeply linked to and influenced by the land.

⁵ Quote from a Cherokee to chief. Takaki 2008, pp. 121.

Therefore, being separated from this crucial aspect of their culture created in Natives a profound sense of loss of integrity, stolen identity and disorientation.

In New Mexico after the Civil War, when general Kit Carson organized a mission against the Native tribes, another tragic forced march involved Navajo people in 1864. The ‘Long Walk’ is still remembered in oral Navajo’s history as a three-hundred-miles walk to a military concentration camp at Bosque Redondo, in the southeastern desert.

1.3 Cultural disruption with reorganization and “civilization” in reservations

After the deportation of Native populations, in the western part of the Mississippi River (most of it was the Oklahoma territory) and in other sites on the U.S. territory, reservations were created. Indian reservation refers to a limited geographical area ruled by a Native tribe and recognized by American federal government⁶. The purpose of reservations was to confine Indigenous people in a smaller place, socially separated from the white society and postpone their assimilation. The relation between Indians and white people in those territories had usually been difficult and conflictual, since colonists would illegally occupy reservations. Another cause of conflicts and wars were the attempts made by tribes’ members to escape from the reservation, who would become victims of massacres. In the reservations, Indian sovereignty has always been hard and the attempt to govern their given lands in autonomy was an utopian thought. In fact, white colonists always interfered in their politics and economic affairs, since the final aim was to assimilate and ‘civilize’ Native Americans to make them part of the new American society. Therefore, land administration and self-determination in reservations encountered many obstacles such as the progressive loss of Native languages and precarious political institutions that tried to preserve the autonomy of their communities.

⁶ Nowadays there are 326 reservations in the U.S.A., each one associated with a Nation. Today Navajo Nation is the biggest and most populated one, followed by Cherokee Nation.

Finding and maintaining a federal trust between Western society and Indian communities was a way to reach balance and a common agreement, even though Indigenous people had always been disadvantaged.

Reservation life was extremely hard for Indians, who found themselves in a situation of captivity and poverty where they weren't able to find their traditional foods nor hunting and fishing. For this reason, the American government would send supplies of food to the reservation, however Native Americans, not being used to unhealthy greases and sugar, started suffering from health issues such as diabetes. Another element introduced to Native tribes by white Americans was alcohol, which over time became a serious problem for many Indians who, due to their difficult past and alienation, would abuse of. Moreover, housing has always been hard for many people in reservations: the number of houses available was too low in comparison to the number of people who were forced to live there. This situation led to major overcrowding problems and high levels of homelessness.

A key moment to "solve" the 'Indian Question' was the emanation of the 'Dawes Act' by the American Congress in 1887. With the act, the President had the power to allot reservation lands to individual head of families, without Natives' consent. The advantage of this process was the protection that Indians would gain against land grabbers and the opportunity to become farmers. At the same time, remaining lands in the reservation were assigned to white owners who started to settle in close proximity to Native populations. The system's goal was to accelerate the process of Native Americans' assimilation, transforming them into landowners, farmers and thereafter U.S. citizens. The whole process caused the destruction of the tribal system and sovereignty, which was considered a positive thing for colonizers with the view to progressively teaching them Western work ethic, language and religion. The main idea at the basis of 'Dawes Act' was that Indigenous people would become farmers naturally and part of white society. Another downside of the reorganization process was the gradual loss of Native lands, as whites continued to expand through

railroads and landgrabs after the death of the Native owner. Also, white Americans gradually claimed reservation lands since they weren't used for cultivation by their original owners so, from an expansionist perspective, they were considered useless to Native Americans. The land dispossession happened rapidly: forty years after the 'Dawes Act', Indigenous tribes had lost 60% of their territories becoming landless people and increasing their poverty as they were left with the least-productive lands.

The second turning point brought by the modern federal trust system is represented by the 'Indian Reorganization Act' (1934). It allowed Native Americans to fully retain their properties and the federal government to hold land in trust indefinitely. Moreover the act restored some original tribal properties in their original homelands. This process ended the previous allotment program, which was killing Indian tribal way of life. The system is characterized by a complex duality between tribal government and the federal one, as a result of the 'Indian Reorganization Act' that permitted the creation of independent government within Native tribes and emanation of their own constitution. The aim of the new act was to bring Native Americans into modern life, which isn't necessarily the white American one, and maintain the basic aspect of their traditional and communal culture in a self-determining perspective.

Navajo Nation was one of the tribes that didn't sustain the thought behind the 'Indian Reorganization Act', since it was considered another imposition on their interests and on the way Native tribes should organize their life. This perspective derived from the fact that the American government would still intervene in all economic affairs (such as a stock reduction program in Navajo's territory).

1.4 Native American Literature Renaissance

As regards literature, after decades of cultural oppression and impositions, Native American authors felt the compelling need of starting to regain their expressive power. Since its origins Indigenous culture was essentially oral, transmitted through voices of people from generation to generation with the narration of myths, memories

and poems. However, since the 1960s there has been an obvious flow of published books in the United States. The main goal of the writing of new literary texts during this period was to revive and cherish the heritage of Native Americans through typical images from the memories and history of the communities.

The term 'Native American Literature' was coined for the first time by the American author Kenneth Lincoln in order to represent this new literary movement. Lincoln, associated professor of English and Indian American Studies at the UCLA, during the 60s advocated for the rebirth of the Native culture especially to permit Indian literature to be respected and valued in the academic field. In fact, for decades, American studies comprehended just Western American literary works, obscuring Native American heritage. The acknowledgment and publication of Indian literature represent an enrichment to Literature Studies, an opportunity to expand its inclusivity toward a vital part of American identity. Moreover Lincoln, in his book *Native American Renaissance* (1983) underlines the importance of creating a space for the true voices of the Native traditions, who fought to be heard and understood for decades in a repressive society. Also, in a period strongly characterized by activism to achieve civil rights, literature is the key to invite a larger audience and convey authentic messages about a long-suppressed society. The discovery of the vital essence of the stories told by Native American authors is the crucial point of Lincoln's work. *Native American Renaissance* allowed voices with different traditional backgrounds to be empowered and to express their stories. The major literary figures are Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and James Welch. The recognition by academic authorities of those voices and backgrounds shows the acceptance of a different type of creativity, a fresh use of images and symbolism coming from past traditions and new styles of writing. Another great part of the renaissance is constituted by the retranslations and republications of oral stories and songs that form part of original cultures.

2 *Love Medicine*: analysis

2.1 Louise Erdrich: Her life connected to the Chippewa community

Louise Erdrich, one of the main figures of the second wave of Native American Renaissance, was born on June 7th, 1954, in Little Falls, Minnesota. She is the author of one of the most representative books of Indian modern life: *Love Medicine*. Her heritage, life and education deeply influenced her narrative process, storylines and characters. Specifically, her close position to a Native tribe of North Dakota reservation had a significant impact in her writing and life. Erdrich is a descendant of the Chippewa/Ojibwe¹ tribe: one of the most widespread Native groups in North America nowadays.

Originally, the Ojibwe group was settled in the eastern U.S. coast where their economy was based on hunting and fishing. After the Europeans' arrival and colonization, the traditional American group migrated in the first place to the north of the Lake Huron and Superior Lake area and Michigan. Afterwards, they moved to different places in Minnesota, Ontario, Manitoba, North Dakota, Alberta and Montana. This significant migration brought the population to several divisions in the North American territory and reservations, creating within the Ojibwe group many different communities, in need to readapt their economy to agriculture due to the limitations of the fishing and hunting activity caused by the 'Treaty of Washington' (1855). The treaty was made by the American federal government that owned the majority of the lands, without a proper representation and consent of the

1 'Chippewa' or 'Ojibwe' are interchangeable terms to refer to the same cultural Native American group. The term 'Ojibwe' name recalls their roots and the traditional activity of 'puckering up' the materials to make moccasins, a typical piece of clothing of the tribe. The word 'Chippewa' derives from the improper pronunciation of the Indian population's name by white American society. Nowadays they are both used by Native American members.

Chippewa tribe. During those sour times Native Americans were affected by incredible poverty and food starving, the majority of them couldn't afford their own lands anymore. Despite that hard situation, Ojibwes fought and gradually started a resurgence of Indians sovereignty. 'Anishinaabeg' is a term used by people within the community to indicate themselves as humans (in contrast to "inhuman" white Americans), especially during the period of the genocide. Nowadays this term is still common among the tribes and usually has a spiritual connotation. The large group of Ojibwe, in its internal variety of dialects and uses, comprehends bands recognized by the U.S. federal government in their independent organization; one of them is the 'Turtle Mountain'. Numerous traditional elements of Ojibwe tradition are still a core part of their life today: it's essential to maintain alive languages, religions, rituals and the orality of their literature. For instance, 'powwow' are moments where Ojibwe people meet to revive their friendships with dances and songs. These special events represent an opportunity for the tribes' members to reconnect to their 'Mother earth' through music and reenforce their pride. Many of the songs have been recomposed to recall traditional aspects and integrate them with a present perspective in a social, religious and political key. Rituals like this are crucial to share and create connections within the community, with the purpose of transmitting the Native heritage and values. In addition, many other rituals and sacrifices had a magical and spiritual connotation for the tribe, which connected them with divine figures, nature and asters. Recently, it has been a great challenge to keep the community strong and cohesive, due to migrations and integrations with different cultures. Marriages between Native descendants and European-Americans are an evident example of this melting process and they are progressively more common in the present day. Also, boarding schools, where young Native Americans were brought to assimilate the white American culture, stripped away children from their uses, dresses and language. For this reason, the Turtle Mountain government invests on the creation of community moments and the passing of the Chippewa's heritage onto new

generations. The goal is to avoid the disappear of a culture while the community risks to lose many aspects (especially the oral ones). Language is a central issue of this matter: the Ojibwe language is now spoken by 60,000 people in North America, but they are gradually declining. Original Native language had survived for decades, however fluent speakers are now aging and the habit of speaking the Ojibwe idiom is slowly disappearing in new generations, who are more bound to speak mainly English. The issue is not in the Ojibwe language itself, since it is complete in its structure, grammar and syntax and it represents a strong bond to Indians' past and ways of thinking, to the nature and the environment surrounding the tribes. Therefore, older speakers are working to teach and transmit the Anishinaabeg language through educational initiatives: the scope is to preserve Chippewa cultural ways, humor, childhood memories and entertainment styles through bilingual books and anthologies. Oral stories of the Ojibwe community are the literary tools that hold the people together in a process of sharing memories from their ancestors and old tales which represent central values of their identity. Especially in the past, stories were conveyed just through their voices, allowing the spread of a variety of changes and interpretations in favor of the creation of the strongest bond within the society. However, as shown by the loss caused by the genocide during the 19th century, orality can be so fragile and hard to understand by someone who's not inside the cultural circle. The Native American Renaissance and modern written literature balance Native culture's conservation with evolution: integrating traditional stories and habits with a modern perspective make the literature more accessible and easier to be known by a larger audience. Louise Erdrich is arguably the most influential writer who introduced typical Chippewa life in her narration, in the most authentic way.

Louise Erdrich's mother came from a French Ojibwe family while her father was a German American. Her family, a balanced mixture of a great diversity of backgrounds, stimulated the author to develop a critical and open view of the

balance between the differences in contemporary society. She grew up in a small town in North Dakota's Red River Valley, following Catholic values (combined with Ojibwe religious beliefs). Her grandfather (tribal chairman, activist for tribal rights, storyteller and powwow dancer) covered a crucial role in her community life, since he encouraged Louise Erdrich's interest and connection to the 'Turtle Mountain Band' of Chippewa. He also represented an example to her, since she brings up pieces of stories about the Great Depression among Indians in her books (*Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*). She created a close dialogue with this part of her heritage that strongly defined her identity as a Native American. This perspective and desire to reconnect and acknowledge one's family history and one's lineage is very common within Native American community. This process is possible through oral tradition acknowledgment and knowing U.S. federal government position in the matter of Indians history and how to mediate with it. In addition, storytelling was a central habit in her family, a moment of sharing events with others. Besides the contents, specific sounds and rhythm are something that shaped her way of perceiving and writing literature. Encouraged by her father, Erdrich started writing stories since she was a child and kept this passion to the point she enrolled in the Dartmouth College² course in English and Creative Writing, with the first class of women admitted to the institution. During a seminar on Native American Studies that increased her interest in Chippewa's background, she met her future husband Michael Dorris, anthropologist. While she was still studying, she wrote many poems, later published in the collection called *Jacklight* (1984) and started the writing process of a fiction book titled *Tracks*, released only in 1988 after many revisions. After experiencing various manual jobs and becoming the director and editor of the Native American newspaper *The Circle* in Boston, she went back to Dartmouth where she started her relationship with Dorris, married him and became adoptive mother to three Native American children. The connection with Dorris was fundamental to her first literary

2 The college in 1972 had recently introduced the first course regarding Native American Studies to serve the education of Indian young people and give recognition to the subject.

productions. Over the years, they deeply influenced each other in the writing process, reciprocally reviewing and editing their works. They co-wrote many pieces (the most known is *The Crown of Columbus*, 1991) and he first helped her to be published. Together with Erdrich's cultural heritage and lineage involved in the Chippewa environment, her husband represents an important figure who motivated her toward the expression of her perspective and a representation of Indians' life in contemporary times. During those years, Louise Erdrich was writing a series of short stories inspired by the Chippewa landscape; one of them was the opening chapter ("The World's Greatest Fisherman") of her first novel, which won the 'Nelson Algren Fiction Award', giving her the first public recognition. Michael Dorris noticed that her single short stories could become chapters of a whole novel, a bigger piece of work which was published for the first time in the fall of 1984 under the title of *Love Medicine*. In 1993, the author decided to revise and add some chapters and release a second edition of the book. After two years from *Love Medicine*, she published the novel *The Beet Queen*, keeping the narration set in North Dakota. Then she kept adding poems, novels, children's literature and short stories to American Indian Literature. She gave birth to three daughters, and in 1991 her life was impacted by the tragic death of her adoptive 23-years-old son killed in a car accident. In 1996 she ended the marriage with Michael Dorris (who committed suicide a year later). Today, Erdrich owns an independent bookstore in Minneapolis while she keeps writing and talking about her Chippewa identity in terms of community and connection, which made her one of the most influential authors in contemporary Native American Literature.

2.2 Context of the book *Love Medicine* and its purpose

Louise Erdrich built her literature based on the Chippewa context: the clearest example of it is *Love Medicine*. The novel is the reflection of Native's lifestyle and way of thinking. She conveys each character's story in an authentic way, portraying

the postmodern life in the reservations, places that even in postcolonial times are not actually free from impositions. Western people never left Indians' territories, in fact they forced their culture and spread whites' language and beliefs. The rules imposed over time to control those territories compromised Indians freedom and their self-governing society, to the point that affected their identity and shaped negatively their possibilities and boundaries. The causes of the colonial process were diseases, poverty, land and cultural loss inside the Chippewa community. Everything that they were and possessed before the U.S. federal government imposition has disappeared and substituted with Christianity, boarding schools, land allotment laws and taxes. Louise Erdrich embodies in her writings Native Americans' desire to find their identity and sense of belonging to their community while still interacting with U.S. new values. Also, a wide-spread stereotype that the author contrasts with her novels is the simplistic image and idea about Native American: from the colonialism era to the 70s Indians were seen as victim primitives, noble savages or limited in depictions of 'cowboys and Indians'. Moreover, Indians have been mistakenly grouped into one large category, without counting differences between tribes, families and single individuals obscuring the real Native essence. Erdrich inverted this portrait and this idea with her narrative style and contents. The novel *Love Medicine* incorporates the struggles of expressing and defining Ojibwe identity for individuals, relating to a family and a community. The solution and novel's core are letting the characters' voices speak on their own about their experiences and their personal perspective. Each one with a different background, traits and desires, yet connected to one another by a powerful heritage.

The period of publication of *Love Medicine* represents a great occasion to spread a literary work from an internal perspective of the Chippewa landscape and taking part of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance movement. Indeed, Louise Erdrich was able to create a stimulating book, not only for people in the Native American Studies context, but, for a larger audience. Erdrich's novels are a great

source of knowledge for people who live in North Dakota (or U.S. in general) but descend from a European family. Those people who nowadays occupy Indian lands, most of the time aren't completely aware of the history of those places and its people.

The novel was positively received by many critics and experts in North America and Europe, winning many prizes such as the 'National Book Critics Circle Award' in 1984 for the best work of fiction. It is positively recognized by Kenneth Lincoln as an oral tradition testimony that represents the Native American essence during a period of rebirth.

Moreover, her narration includes recognizable elements such as Native typical humor and symbolism to represent in an authentic manner the soul of the original culture. The core of the narration is reflecting the oral tradition typical of Native American tribes. The purpose of the novel isn't just conveying a group of short stories and offering simple entertainment: it represents the possibility to give voices to Chippewa Native Americans individuals through the characters of the stories in a new yet authentic manner. Those who have always been misunderstood by external societies, are given the power to tell their stories according to their own perspective and transmit the sufferings they face in the modern and postmodern era, balancing past with present. This permitted to reach a wide audience and spread awareness of this culture from an inner perspective that was previously unheard. The key to reading a novel like *Love Medicine* is understanding the necessity of the rebirth of an identity after the tragic historical events that happen and still affect the American context.

2.3 Presentation of the narration: storyline and analysis of the characters

Love Medicine is a complex body of work composed of eighteen chapters, with a non-linear chronological order. A set of short stories narrated by a dozen different characters who found themselves to be all connected in a bigger picture equally. It

presents a great diversity of about twenty individuals going through life experiences until finding their belongingness to an extended family, a shared identity and community. The readers go through different pieces of the story told by the protagonists, in a narration that chronologically starts in 1934 and ends in 1984. The narration comprehends the events regarding mainly four Ojibwe families: the Kashpaws, the Lamartine, the Pillagers and the Morrisey's. Their interconnections take place around the North Dakota reservation, key territory that permits Louise Erdrich to convey cultural tradition and the obstacles in Chippewa context. Also, the plot is composed by different generations of the families. The older generation comprehends Eli Kashpaw, Moses Pillager, Fleur Pillager, Old Nanapush and Rushes Bear. Those are the people who were most deeply connected to the original traditions and lived through the hardest events of the Native American history such as impositions, introduction of boarding schools, epidemics and land control by the U.S. government. The second generation sees as protagonists Nector, Marie and Lulu, who represent survival from poverty conditions. Finally, Albertine, Lyman, Henry Junior, Lipsha and Gerry form part of the younger generation of the families, the one that owns the Indian heritage and tries to create a better future for their community.

The author creates a circular framework of time that closes at the end of the book. Each chapter is written by a protagonist from their own perspective, with a few fragments characterized by a third-person omniscient narrator. Every piece of the story works as a vehicle to represent a theme, linking the fiction to real Native American life.

Narrated in third-person, the opening chapter ("The World's Greatest Fisherman (1981)") presents June Kashpaw's death, set in 1981. The beginning of the novel depicts the Chippewa woman walking along the cold North Dakota streets, during the morning before Easter Sunday, in the attempt of returning home from the city. She is pictured proceeding alone through the snow, knowing instinctively the way to follow, without an explicit purpose. Her destination was the Indian reservation, her

hometown, which she could never reach because of her passing away. This narration is followed by June's niece Albertine Johnson's report. From her perspective, she articulates the moment of returning to the reservation, where she meets the rest of the Kashpaw family in occasion of her aunt June's funeral. In this part of the story, the readers are given more information about June: a lonely person who left her home for a long time. She had two sons, later revealed in the novel: King, who was raised by her, and Lipsha, who for the first part of his life didn't know his biological parents and was raised by Marie and Nector Kashpaw. June, even not being a narrator herself, remains still one of the main characters of the story, connecting many members of the family. She is remembered in the first chapter by the conversations between the Kashpaws and the many memories of her that are shared during several moments in the novel. This kind of connection between people is very typical and eradicated in Native American culture. It is the first of many reflections of the traditional Ojibwe beliefs written by the author. Despite the chapter being centered on Albertine point of view, there is still room for other family members' voices in a series of storytelling and gossip. June is presented as a person who struggled between the Native values and pursuing her own desires, which creates the tension between embracing her cultural heritage and assimilating into mainstream society (common issue in Indian societies). Moreover, her identity was shaped by the unstable family structure who made up her internal conflicts.

After the first chapter set in the 80s, the author introduces the second one titled "Saint Marie (1934)", a story told by the main female character Marie Lazarre. In these pages, she presents herself as a 14-years-old girl raised in the reservation who intends to go to the 'Sacred Heart Convent'. Her purpose was to be educated by Sister Leopolda, in order to become the first saint in the reservation, since she was convinced to "not have much of Indian blood"³, as she is coming from the poor and frowned upon family of the Lazzarres. Leopolda is revealed to be an abusive nun who

3 Erdrich 2004, pp. 43.

wants to purify the “dark” soul of Marie from Satan through tortures justified by Catholic procedures. Elements like evil and darkness are at the center of this narration and considered to be the impure Indian part corrupting and distracting Marie. Sister Leopolda constantly uses physical and verbal violence on the young girl, until Marie decides to escape. In this part of the narration, Erdrich introduces elements of criticism toward Catholic religion. Indeed, this creed had a strong impact on Indians since the colonization era: at first it was imposed upon Indigenous people’s spirituality; in the postmodern era the two faiths had to mediate and coexist in the same territory and inside the same people’s mentality.

The character of Marie Lazarre/Kashpaw reappears as the main one in the fifth chapter called “The Beads (1948)”, where she revalues those Christian beliefs taught to her fourteen years before. Indeed, Catholic values are seen by the grown Marie Kashpaw through different eyes, the Native ones. She uses Ojibwe criteria and pride to redefine her view of the world and identity: another matter that involves the Ojibwe community. At this point of the story she had found her identity as a woman and mother to Zelda, Gordie, Aurelia. Marie Kashpaw is a complex and intriguing character, a Native American woman who possesses a strong sense of independence and resilience. Marie's life is marked by a series of hardships and challenges, which she confronts with determination and a touch of rebelliousness. Her sense of responsibility is underlined by the fact that she accepted to take care of her sister’s orphan child June. Many other Chippewa children had been informally adopted by Marie, underling the strong sense of responsibility towards the community, despite blood-relatedness. Also, Marie is known for her striking beauty and magnetic personality, which often captivate those around her. However, beneath her appearance lies a deep sense of vulnerability and a longing for love and acceptance. Throughout the novel, Marie's relationships with men are tumultuous and often fraught with disappointment. For instance, an important issue is shown when she tracks her husband Nector Kashpaw, affected by a gambling and alcohol addiction.

Marie's personality exhibits a remarkable strength, forgiveness and resourcefulness. She is not afraid to take risks or make unconventional choices in order to assert her independence and find her own path in life. A unique moment that closes the fifth chapter is the difficult labor that Marie goes through before giving birth to her last of seven children. Risking death is a moment that profoundly changed her, empowering her sense of independence and identity as a Native American woman. Marie's journey is one of self-discovery and self-empowerment, as she navigates the complexities of her Native American heritage and the challenges of living in a society that often marginalizes her. This process is well narrated by Louise Erdrich, who stimulates many readers' empathy.

Her process of defining and exploring her identity as a proud Ojibwe woman reaches a peak in the eighth chapter "Flesh and blood (1957)". In these pages Marie Kashpaw goes to visit the dying Sister Leopolda, who once was her teacher. Moreover, Marie described the scene when she finds Nector's letter confessing his infidelity with Lulu Lamartine during the marriage. After reading the letter, Marie shows her forgiveness to her husband's weaknesses, resuming their lives together and pretending she never found out his truth.

Second chapter "Saint Marie (1934)" is followed by the narration by another principal figure, Nector Kashpaw. The chapter called "Wild Geese (1934)" is set on the same day as the previous one ends. In fact, the author describes the first encounter between young Marie Lazarre and Nector Kashpaw, happened when he was convinced of his love for Lulu Lamartine, which he intended to marry. Indeed, he was thinking of Lulu when he suddenly crosses for the first time with Marie, running down the hill in her escape from the 'Sacred Heart Convent'. Despite his negative prejudice about her family, he immediately notices her confidence and strong temper, in a meeting full of tension that right after transformed into attraction. Nector represents a central male character of the novel, a good-looking man with a charismatic personality coming from a respectable family of hereditary leaders of the

tribe. He was sent to boarding school in the city where he learnt white ways of reading and writing, contrary to his brother Eli Kashpaw, who was educated in the reservation. He had the chance to experience life within the Western society, however he had never fully fit in. In the chapter “The Plunge Of The Brave (1957)” he described job offers that he received in the city, thanks to his Indian appearance. He was asked to represent an Indian’s death in a movie scene or be painted as the good Indian in a portrait. That situation couldn’t appeal to him, the deep difference between two cultures in the United States was shown to him during his life and he returned to the reservation. He married Marie, even if he never stopped thinking about his first love Lulu Lamartine. His married life was hard for him: two of his children died and he constantly felt the need to escape. He took good care of all his children and those who Marie decided to take in. He also became a tribal chairman but drinking and gambling became a big part of his life as he became older, as a result of his dissatisfaction in the life he was living. In the story, Nector becomes progressively unstable in his relationships with women. He suffers from a lack of sincere emotional connection and often seeks an escape in alcohol or cheating on Marie with Lulu. Nector is a character who represents inner struggle and the pursuit of happiness. Despite his imperfections, Nector also embodies a certain hope as he tries to find a sense of love and belonging in his life. He confesses through a letter his infidelity to Marie in an attempt to finally change his life and be with Lulu for good. However fate prevents him from doing so and he returns home to his wife. Gradually he starts to suffer from a loss of memory. This process is analyzed by the character Albertine in the first chapter as a consequence of his white American education, which is something that made him forget about oral Native traditions⁴. This interpretation wants to transmit the message of a predominant culture and its irreversible and negative effect of the Native oral culture.

4 Erdrich 2004, pp. 19.

The fourth chapter “The Island” introduces another central female figure of the novel: Lulu Nanapush/Lamartine. The chapter recounts the time when the girl went back to the reservation, in her uncle Nanapush’s house, when she discovered that her first love Nector was married to Marie. Right after that she decided to go visit Moses Pillager, an Indian cousin of hers who lived isolated in the island, who soon became her lover. This part enlightens her desire to discover her Indian roots, through her evident independence and determination to live without following others’ rules. Another element that characterized Lulu’s life is the multiplicity of her lovers (Nector Kashpaw, Moses Pillager, Henry Lamartine, Beverly Lamartine and a Mexican migrant worker). From many of them she had nine children. In the sixth chapter titled “Lulu’s Boys”, readers are presented to Lulu’s eight sons and their connection as a portrait of the structure of a Native American family. One of the goals of this part is to present the dynamics within a family, in particular in the reservation and how these relations can affect each one’s identity differently.

“A Bridge (1973)” and “The Red Convertible (1974)” are two chapters set in the 70s, focusing on the younger generation of the main families. The first one tells the story of a long car journey to Alaska made by two of Lulu’s sons: Lyman and Henry Junior Lamartine. The veteran Henry (Lulu and Beverly Lamartine’s son), after coming back from the traumatic experience of the Vietnamese war, meets the fifteen-years-old Albertine who was going to Fargo for her studies. The two spent a night together. The second chapter is written from the perspective of Lyman Lamartine, Lulu and Nector’s son. He tells about the trip on a Red Convertible that he and his brother Henry Junior had bought together. This journey shows their last chance to be together and underlines their close bond. Lyman noticed significant changes in Henry after he came back from Vietnam: the war context had changed him deeply and left him with trauma affecting his behavior. During the trip, Henry appeared very quiet and traumatized, for long times he didn’t even move nor talk. He only had a few flashes where he seemed the same boy he was before the war while he joked

with Lyman, however these moments last just for few instants. Later, he decided to give the whole car to Lyman, then he suddenly jumped in the river, where he drowned right in front of his brother. His deep suffering brought him to silently commit suicide, an act that reflects his impossibility to find a way of escaping from the trauma.

The chapter that chronologically precedes June's death is titled "Scales (1980)". It's a narration by Albertine Johnson about her pregnant friend Dot Adare, Gerry Nanapush's wife. In the story they tried to hide Gerry from the police, implicitly criticizing the American penal system's laws which according to Gerry doesn't correspond to justice. At the end she gives birth to a baby girl while her husband is in prison.

The following part of the novel presents Gordie Kashpaw, Nector and Marie's son and June's husband and cousin. The chapter "Crown of Thorns (1981)" takes place a month after June's death. Gordie is despairing, shaking and sick, reversing his sadness on alcohol. His addiction has completely taken over him, to the point he starts seeing his dead wife around him after invoking her. He is hallucinating and in a precarious mental state. When he was drunk driving, he hit a deer on the street and decided to put it in the back seat to later trade it for alcohol. Then he realized that the deer had resurrected, so he hit it again and suddenly thought to have murdered June. There is an analogy between the animal and June. Consequently, he met Sister Mary Martin, who empathized and had compassion for the man. She represents the Catholic religion, the dominant Western part who wants to help the Native American, seen in a more positive light in contrast to the previous abusive figure of Sister Leopolda. However, Mary's attempt to help Gordie was a failure, since she can't actually understand his perspective and provide the comfort he needed: she wasn't able to see beyond her own culture, and seeing the murder of an animal as something as tragic as a Chippewa person can perceive. Gordie's feelings of isolation and self-destructive behavior are intensively described through the chapter, adding

up to the strong addiction to alcohol that happens to be very common among many Native Americans. He falls in an oblivion of madness and suffering, losing sense of consciousness and lucidity in what he sees. This part of the narration could be considered belonging to fantastic or grotesque genre, due to the unrealistic events. However, seeing the situation as unrealistic or magical isn't Louise Erdrich's goal, in fact, the key to reading the scenes is to empathize with the character and his state of mind, in order to fully comprehend the reasons behind his way of thinking. Gordie's relationship with alcohol and his fall into the addiction can be found in the fourteenth chapter "Resurrection (1982)" as well. In particular, in this part is presented the gradual and irreversible decline of Gordie in alcoholism as well as his relationship with his helping mother Marie Kashpaw during those hard times. Once more her role is to take care of a member of her family, like she did for her husband Nector.

"Love Medicine (1984)" is the thirteenth chapter and the one that gives the title of the whole novel. The narration is constructed on Lipsha Morrissey's perspective. He is Gerry and June's biological son, however he was adopted and raised by Marie and Nector Kashpaw, for whom he held a great esteem and gratitude. He had a "healing gift": by laying his hands on the patient he could heal both spiritual and physical spheres (a Judeo-Christian and Indigenous practice). He noticed that his Grandpa Nector was losing his sanity, starting to lose his memory, however he was still a very smart man, aware of his falling. Lipsha tried to understand how to help him by placing his both hands around Nector's head. He knew that it was impossible to treat his grandfather just with his "touch", he was too tangled up in his mind. Moreover, his hunting thoughts about his old love Lulu Lamartine constantly occupy his thoughts, which pressured his wife Marie and Lipsha to solve and make him keep his mental stability. To preserve Nector faithfulness, Marie suggests Lipsha to get a love medicine. Love medicines are a special element exclusively of the Chippewa tribe, a very specific and dangerous tool if used in the wrong way. Lipsha considered to go to

Fleur Pillager to obtain the “old Chippewa specialty”⁵, but then opting for a different method. By noticing two flying geese, which are mates for life, the boy thought to kill a pair of them and feed Marie and Nector with their hearts, in order to save their fragile love. Failing in the attempt of shooting two flying geese, he buys two frozen turkeys, justifying the power of the love medicine exclusively on the faith in the cure. Lipsha blessed the two hearts in holy water himself. Marie ate the heart without hesitation and ordered Nector to do the same. But when Nector did it, he choked on it and unexpectedly died. His death unites again the family for the funeral, bringing out the closeness that characterizes them. After Nector’s death, Marie confessed to Lipsha that she was seeing her husband every night thanks to the love medicine. Lipsha explained that his visits were proof of the power of his love, which overcame their distance to reach her once again. Lipsha is a character that during his life struggled in defining his identity. The lack of knowledge about her biological mother who rejected him, subconsciously causes him insecurities and a desire to find his life purpose. Later in the chapter Lipsha found out that his mother was June, and during Nector’s funeral he developed the idea to reconnect with his brother King, forgiving the past lies he had been told and recognizing the importance of the bond in the family. Moreover, Lipsha has a kind and altruist soul, he helps people through his healing gift and Ojibwe traditions. Another bright characteristic that represents the key to the chapter and the novel, is his desire of maintaining a family united, preserving the sense of belongingness and holding together the people that he loves. Lipsha embodies in the novel the strong sense of resilience of the Native American traditions and the hope of saving a community accepting his heritage.

In the chapter “The Good Tears (1983)”, Lulu Lamartine reappears telling her story. She describes truly her personality, both as she is seen by external misunderstanding eyes and from her inner point of view. People said that she had too many lovers, but she only had them for her profound love for the world and most

5 Erdrich 2004, pp. 241.

things that life has to offer. In fact, she is aware of herself, her pride and her reasons without the need to apologize for who she is. She is a very determined person, someone who goes “through life like a breeze”⁶, who doesn’t get too attached to people or situations, except for Nector Kashpaw. He was her first love, and despite their distance and different life paths and marriages, they were always connected and found their way back to each other. They also had a son together (Lyman) while Nector used to go visit her (cheating on his wife Marie). For five years they would see each other, after Lulu’s husband Henry Lamartine’s death. She didn’t believe in systems and numbers, neither in the U.S. government who for years counted Indians with the only purpose of murdering them. For this reason, she refused to let United States census takers in her house. Nector went to her house trying to convince her to move West, on the other side of the Great Lakes, like the rest of the Chippewa tribe. Lulu refused to move showing her resilience and unwavering determination. Her decision not to shift westward echoes the painful historical chapter of the ‘Trail of Tears’, where indigenous communities were forcibly moved from their ancestral territories to regions west of the Mississippi River, designated as ‘Indian land’. The tribe had intentions to erect a factory that produced items deemed as valueless on the very land where Lulu and Henry's house was situated. Lulu presented her case at the tribal council, emphasizing the longstanding presence of the Lamartine family on that land and their rightful claim to remain there. Then, Nector set fire to Lulu's home, where she had momentarily left her youngest son Lyman, who she managed to rescue just in time. Lulu suspected that this might have been part of Nector and the tribe’s plan to conveniently clear her land. Another aspect enlightened in the novel is Lulu’s emotional reaction to tragic deaths in her life: she never emotionally recovered from the moment when Henry Junior took his own life drawing in the river. She knew that the worst death for a Chippewa was drowning because they never made it to the next life, destined to wander forever with nowhere to go. She never cried after

6 Erdrich 2004, pp. 281.

Nector's death, scared that she would never be able to stop this suffering. Nevertheless, her friendship with Marie Kashpaw encouraged her to express her conflicting emotions openly and shed tears, rather than suppressing her feelings.

Lyman details the partnership between the two women in the subsequent chapter titled "The Tomahawk Factory (1983)" wherein Marie and Lulu become active participants in the reservation's political affairs. He was Lulu and Nector's son, but he considered himself fully a Lamartine member, underling his belongingness to the family who raised him rather than blood-relation. Nonetheless he has inherited a good capitalist sense of money from his biological father, Nector. Lyman proposed the construction of a tribal souvenir factory, an idea initially suggested by Nector in years past, aiming to create fake arrows, plastic bows, children's feathered headdresses, and costume accessories. Yet, Lulu and Marie Kashpaw, representing traditional values, insisted on a shift towards crafting museum-quality artifacts. However, Lyman transitioned from individual handcrafted works to assembly line production.

Lyman narration continued in the following chapter called "Lyman's Luck (1983)". The events unfolded in 1983, immediately after the destruction of his factory. Lyman was contemplating a strategy for his next financial move. He resolved to capitalize on the American Indian gaming regulations recently enacted by Congress, trying to open a casino. Lyman articulated his frustration and anger over the historical mistreatment of Native Americans and past injustices. A key element of Lyman's vision was to provide employment opportunities to the local residents from his reservation as well as a desire for revenge against the U.S. government. The strong words he used to convey his message were:

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 mouth. (...) It was time, high past time the Indians smartened up and started using the only leverage they had - federal law.⁷

⁷ Erdrich 2004, pp. 326.

Erdrich introduces this strong monologue to express a deep feeling that many unheard Indigenous people's voices desire to spread on the topic of colonization.

The closing chapter titled "Crossing the water (1984)" is the great sum up of the essence of the story. It represents the discovery of one's identity, a result of life experiences, love, relationships, family connections and sense of belongingness to a larger network. This process involves every character in the story, each one in a different way and time.

The first part is narrated by the kid Howard Kashpaw, Lynette and King Junior's son. He is a very intelligent kid at school, where he chooses to be called just by his name 'Howard' in the place of 'King Howard Kashpaw Junior'. The narration portrays Howard staring at the wallpaper in a bathroom while his parents are arguing in the next room and wonders if his family will manage to stay together (his father risks being arrested again). This image conveys an impactful feeling of fragility about the family, which reflects on the young boy.

The second part is unfolded by Lipsha, who described the series of events that he went through, which are the key to his research of meaning of life and identity. He discovered the truth about his family: Lulu confessed that June and Gerry are his biological parents and Henry Junior is his half-brother. Lipsha leaves on a journey toward the border and during his travels he encounters King Junior, his half-brother, who had spent some time in prison with his father Gerry. They reminisced about their childhood experiences and talked about their family's past. Gerry, who escaped from prison, joined them to finally meet Lipsha and the three played a card game, through which Lipsha won King Junior's car. When the police arrived, Gerry managed to slip away, and the three went separate ways. Driving away, Lipsha suddenly discovered his father Gerry hidden in the trunk of his car. They proceed together toward the border to help Gerry escape, while sharing heartfelt conversations about Lulu's resilience and June's beauty. Upon reaching the border Gerry crossed over to freedom, limited to go back to his homeland. Lipsha drove back

in his mother's car, eventually stopping on a bridge at the border of the reservation to gaze at the river, reflecting on his parents, June and Gerry. He states that it's time to "cross the water, and bring her home"⁸, referring to both his mother's car and the memory and awareness he had acquired about his parents, which is something that marked him forever.

2.4 Genre of *Love Medicine*: style of writing and multi-narrators technique

Louise Erdrich's style of writing is a particular and special feature that made her works recognizable in the American literature context. To understand the motifs behind her techniques it's crucial to notice her inspiration to Native Americans' oral storytelling and how this element shaped the structure of her writings. The narration built by Erdrich echoes the orality, which was the center of Chippewa literature. Through the book *Love Medicine* many orality characteristics find their way to be transmitted through books, a way to preserve their relevance in a context that is constantly changing. However, Louise Erdrich had to find a mediation between the traditional oral storytelling, autobiographical perspective and the Euro-American forms to write fiction. The result appears at the edge of the genre of the novel, unusual and unconventional for the modern and postmodern canon of fiction. Indeed, Erdrich presents characters across generations, blurring the boundaries between protagonists and secondary characters, presenting all individuals as equals. This interconnectedness of traditional structure opposes the Western canon that typically maintains a defined hierarchy within the narration. Moreover, the postmodern tendency is the one to marginalize minorities such as Native American tribes and their traditions, favoring the white dominant culture. This particular aspect is contrasted by the authentic focus of the Ojibwe culture in *Love Medicine*. Finally, the author introduces magical scenes and dream-like hallucinations as they were common

8 Erdrich 2004, pp. 367.

elements in the characters' lives, in contrast to a strict and usual distinction between realism and surrealism.

The core piece of the style is given by the use of a multi-perspective narration, which aligns with the postmodern tendency of fragmentation and first-person perspectives. The author uses a multiple narration, alternating different voices and perspectives, to tell the story of a Native American community over a span of more than fifty years. This narrative technique creates an intricate plot in which past and present intertwine and overlap. The non-linear timeline contributes to the apparent fragmentation within the novel. The years in which the stories are set are made explicit thanks to the numeration under each chapter's title, helping the readers reconstructing the plot. The characters' life experiences create a deep connection between stories and narration, which is essential to reflect the reality of her community and to mirror the soul of Native American orality. She conveys deeply the feelings and emotions of the characters, marking their importance and elevating each individual, with the possibility of expressing their own stories. At the same time, the absence of a protagonist presents the characters of the book as equal, significantly different from each other, yet sharing the same desire of finding themselves, belongingness to a culture and preserving human connections. The structure mirrors the Native community in its rejection of a hierarchical set among the people and of the refusal of one predominant voice. Every character's part can be seen as a short story, read by its own, not related to the others. Reading the stories under one bigger picture helps to notice the analogies, the relations, recurring patterns and common elements that link the people described in *Love Medicine*. This fragmentation makes the classification of *Love Medicine* in just a genre not easy. It can be recognized as a set of short stories, since each chapter has a closure and it's not explicitly connected with the previous nor the following ones, typical characteristic of the short story genre. Theorists have therefore suggested terms such as is "short story sequence" or the "short story cycle" as description of the book. Indeed, stories appear linked to

each other maintaining a balance between their own individuality and the necessities of the larger unit. Louise Erdrich has categorized her work as “novel-in-stories”, focusing on the fact that each story leads to another, despite the plot not being structured as the typical linear novel. Yet the plot and its shape are given by the recurring patterns that the reader is encouraged to connect. The final result longed by the author is the meeting of Native American heritage and the Western modernist literary tradition.

The language used is rich in vivid imagery, powerful metaphors and symbolism, giving the story extraordinary depth and beauty. Many Chippewa ancestral traditions are shown in the story, creating a magical glaze in several moments. Other central aspects of the book are the use of satire and humor, as well as carnival and grotesque realism. Carnivalizing techniques are common in Native American literature to emphasize the equalitarian values of Indian culture and invert Euro-American hierarchical culture. Often the Native American response to their cultural destruction and past traumas emerge in modern literature as an element of humor. Indeed, Louise Erdrich defines her “survival humor” as an ironic perspective that enables people to endure what they “have to live with”⁹. The use of satire (in scenes of the depiction of alcoholism, for instance) is a consequence of the abused romanticization of Native Americans.

9 Stookey 1999, pp. 10.

3 Belongingness through central themes

3.1 Female figure and motherhood in *Love Medicine*

A central theme in Native American literature is the female figure, developed differently during the course of events in the U.S. territory. Native American women's history is a rich tapestry, often overlooked in mainstream narratives. These women have played fundamental roles in their communities for centuries, serving as mothers, matriarchs, healers and leaders. They've passed down traditional knowledge, maintained tribal cultures and acted as intermediaries between their people and colonizers. Despite enduring profound hardships and discrimination, Native American women have shown remarkable resilience, advocating for their rights and those of their communities, preserving their heritage during cultural changes. Native American women's history is a testament to the enduring spirit of a group too often marginalized and underrepresented in historical narratives.

Traditionally, Native American women held crucial positions as gatherers, healers, and keepers of tribal knowledge. They played significant roles in decision-making, often as matriarchs, and contributed to their communities' social, cultural, and economic structures. However, with the arrival of European settlers the status of Native American women began to shift. As colonialism intensified, many aspects of traditional gender roles and women's authority were disrupted¹. Indigenous women experienced the loss of land, culture, and autonomy. John Smith's narrative of 'Princess Pocahontas', one of the first and most widely recognized depictions of a Native American woman in the Euro-American context, was the exploited image that

¹ Allen 1992, pp.43-44

symbolized the “New World” in Western literature. The image of Pocahontas represents the idealized “good Indian” in the American myth, contrasting the “bad Indian” or squaw, in a hunting dichotomy used to categorize Native women. Moreover, the Indian female figure had to be always defined in relation to white men, as mother and lover, to be considered a real woman. She had to sexually please white men to preserve her given-imaginary of values and sacrifice. Otherwise, she would embody a negative representation of the squaw: “authentic” Indian woman fallen into lust and savage, degraded and objectified (from the white settlers’ point of view).

Both her nobility as a Princess and her savagery as a Squaw is defined in terms of her relationships with male figures. If she wishes to be called Princess, she must save or give aid to white men.²

This controlling and unrealistic distinction contributed to the destruction of a truthful representation of Indigenous women, limiting their role, submitting them to white male heroes and fully denying their identity with the use of discriminating stereotypes. The term ‘squaw’, referred to Native American women, acquired a racist and misogynistic connotation spread through white Euro-Americans depictions of an abused, unattractive and subservient woman. The word diffused widely during the 19th century in Western cultural contexts, causing a rooted discriminating ideology. Nowadays the term is still used and it underlines the negative consequences regarding the perception and determination of Indian women in American society. Indeed, it recalls the dehumanization and violence that Native Americans suffered and shows the difficulties that Native women still have in the process of separating themselves from degrading attributions and wrong interpretations of their culture³.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Indigenous feminism, with Native American women reclaiming their cultural identities and asserting their rights in both traditional and contemporary contexts. Prominent figures like Wilma Mankiller, the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation, have emerged as inspiring leaders,

2 Green 1975, pp. 703.

3 Merskin 2010, pp. 354-355

contributing to the empowerment of Native women⁴. They continue to address issues such as violence against women, access to healthcare, education, and environmental justice. Native American women's history exemplifies a dynamic evolution of the female figure, from its traditional roles to its contemporary positions as leaders, and advocates of cultural preservation and social progress within their communities. Their contributions are instrumental in reshaping the narrative and fighting for justice and recognition, not only for themselves but for all Indigenous peoples. After the replacement of female goddesses with the imposition of a patriarchal nuclear family organization that devalued women's role, there has been a growing effort to provide more authentic and diverse portrayals of Native American women in contemporary literature. These portrayals highlight the strength, resilience and cultural richness of Indigenous women. Authors like Louise Erdrich have played crucial roles in challenging stereotypes and giving voice to the diverse stories of Native American women. Her works explore themes of identity, cultural preservation, and the impact of historical trauma while celebrating the multifaceted roles that Native American women play within their communities. These contemporary representations in literature are essential in dispelling myths and contributing to a more accurate and respectful portrayal of Native American women in the literary world.

In Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*, the portrayal of the female figure is a central theme that reflects the complex dynamics of love, identity, and independence. Through characters like June Kashpaw, Marie Lazarre and Lulu Lamartine, Erdrich explores the strength and vulnerability of Native American women in the face of historical and cultural trauma. These women are the resilient backbone of their families and communities, embodying a deep connection to their ancestral traditions while navigating the challenges of modern life. Erdrich's depiction of the female figure in *Love Medicine* is an authentic exploration of the enduring spirit that

4 Brando, Elizabeth. Wilma Mankiller, National Women's History Museum: <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/wilma-mankiller>

sustains these characters, making them powerful symbols of Ojibwe culture and the human condition. The author is able to convey sufferings and fragilities of female characters while still uplifting their position in the Chippewa context. Erdrich explores character's identity going beyond gender expectations and systems, providing a fresh view on women who live in the reservation.

The fragility of the Native American woman is shown at the beginning of the novel, through the character of June Kashpaw. The first female figure presented to the readers embodies the struggles in finding her role in the reservation's society, both as woman and mother. In fact, she left her homeland in the attempt to create her own individual identity outside the place where she never found the possibility of belongingness. The lack of recognition of her biological parents, and her consequent adoption by Marie Kashpaw caused her internal difficulties in the process of the definition of herself within the society. The absence of recognition of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society and her weakness that prevent her to fight for a change in the tribe made her escape. She rejected her family ties, her traditions and her responsibilities. In the narration, her vulnerability becomes one of the most touching features of her character. After spending years away and losing contacts with her family members, she developed a strong desire of returning to her origins: an inevitable process to reconnect with her community. It is impossible for her to deny the belongingness to the Native Chippewa tribe, despite her will to create independently her identity. In the first chapter of the novel, readers can notice her behavior of detachment from reality. She is characterized by a deep fragility, loss of self-perception and drunk condition, which mirrors her awareness of powerlessness as a Native American woman. Her hope to finally reach her land is the only thing that strengthens her and provides her with the confidence she needs to proceed in her walk. This scene symbolizes "Native Americans' attempts to retain their own heritage and still be a part of American culture"⁵. Moreover, the journey made by a woman

5 Sanders 1998, pp. 146.

acquires a wider meaning: an attempt for women to regain her importance and rights in the oppressive modern society. June's attempt to gain a new recognition fails due to her death. However, her absence unexpectedly represents the rebirth of the Chippewa culture: her recurring presence in the narration through characters' memory is the key to connect the members and keep alive the tradition of family storytelling. In particular, her death is the start of many reconnections and her son's Lipsha journey in learning his identity.

June reaches a balance of the contradictory forces at war within her only after she encounters and is claimed by death. Her journey ends, but it sets others, particularly her son Lipsha, on their own journey⁶.

The figure of Marie Kashpaw represents the embodiment of the journey of defining herself as a strong Ojibwe woman. Marie remains a powerful symbol of endurance and self-determination, showing that even in the face of adversity, Native American women like her can assert their own agency and navigate a world in constant transformation. She starts as a young mixed-blood girl, who wants to become a saint through Christianity, fighting her inner "devil" that is her Indian part, that wants to prevail over her. These negative feelings that she had towards her Indian origins disappear when she marries Nector and finally accepts and embraces her Native origins. Indeed, when she returned to the convent to visit Sister Leopolda, who had tried to fully convert the girl to Christianity, Marie's perception of her own identity had radically changed. She proudly announced her newly adopted status of Native American woman, wife of a tribal chairman. During the fragment, Marie seemed to make her identity depending just on her status of married woman, underlined by Sister Leopolda's impassibility. Consequently, Marie switched the perception of who she is anew, she gained a stronger and more independent sense of self-determination, not linked to any religion nor men. When she discovers her husband's infidelity through a letter she declares:

6 Sanders 1998, pp. 148-49.

I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ends 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!⁷.

This part of the story highlights a turning point of the character: after years of wandering and losing her values and power, she is finally able to reconnect to her deepest essence and nature as a woman to affirm herself. Another significant moment for Marie's identity is when she was giving birth to her child, with the help of her mother Rushes Bear and Fleur Pillager. In the scene she unexpectedly pronounced words in old Indian language, showing her powerful connection with her Ojibwe heritage thanks to her bond with the two older women, symbols of ancestral Native American values. Marie Kashpaw's character serves as a testament to the strength and complexity of women in the Native American context, embodying the enduring spirit that defines their identity in a rapidly evolving society.

Lulu Lamartine, in contrast to Marie who always sought for her reconnection with her Ojibwe heritage, had always a strong sense of belonging to the Chippewa culture. She appears closely connected with nature. She nurtures a deep love for the essence of natural elements that kin her to her heritage, both from a spiritual and material perspective. For this reason, she is able to create many relationships with the ones who form part of her community. For instance, her relationship with Moses Pillager is significant as it recalls her ancestral origins; he embodies the purest and untouched Native American spirit. She claims her Indian origins and values as central in her identity, courage and determination. Indeed, her magical way of living leads her to deal with many difficulties through her confidence. Moreover, her position as Native American woman becomes even more relevant in relation to her many children, who strengthen her role as a mother.

The vibrant, strongly self-aware Lulu is the best illustration that dissolving physical boundaries can strengthen identity...Totally receptive to the natural world, Lulu physically and spiritually opens herself to it all... Lulu's loving, all-

⁷ Erdrich 2004, pp. 165.

inclusive attitude towards life questions even the possibility of imposing boundaries⁸.

An essential relationship depicted in the novel is the one between Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine. The bond that the two create represent the apex of feminism and involvement in empowering one another, in the patriarchal society. They were linked, in an antagonist way, by their love for the same man, Nector. After his death the two find themselves silently sharing the same pain and suffering, which leads to the discovery of many more aspects that they have in common. The two characters mirror each other in a complementary way, merging past and present as they get older.

Their silent communication recalls the pre-symbolic language used between an infant and her mother. They communicate in a fundamentally feminine way as the symbolic wanes and the semiotic is strengthened⁹.

They hardly nominate Nector, in fact her bond is based on reciprocal support and understanding as women. Their non-verbal communication contrasts the imposed patriarchal language, which doesn't leave space for feminine voices. The subtle inversion of the patriarchal system brings Marie and Lulu to meet the female Native American identity through reconciliation and solidarity between women.

Belonging to the older generation, two women Fleur Pillager and Rushes Bear, respectively Lulu's and Marie's mothers, represent an unquestioning link with ancestral and tribal traditional medicine, customs, connection with nature. The two, covering the ancient role of the Ojibwe woman, are in a supporting relationship, respecting each other as women. Fleur Pillager, Lulu's mother, is a mysterious Ojibwe woman with a deep connection to nature and seemingly supernatural abilities; she is both feared and revered within her community.

In addition, motherhood represents a deeply complex theme linked to female characters in the novel. Erdrich includes different maternal experiences, from the

⁸ Clark Smith quoted in Sanders 1998 pp. 140.

⁹ Sanders 1998, pp. 146.

traditional to the contemporary, in the Chippewa community. She dives into the challenges and sacrifices of Native American women as mothers, emphasizing their critical roles in preserving cultural heritage.

Characters like Marie Lazarre and Lulu Lamartine embody the strength and determination of maternal figures who navigate the demands of raising children in the midst of cultural disintegration and challenging social changes. Erdrich's portrayal of motherhood in the narration underlines the adaptability and emotional depth of Native American women. It highlights the importance of maternal figures in sustaining cultural traditions and navigating the challenges created by historical trauma and modernity. The novel serves as a testament to the profound influence of motherhood within the Ojibwe context and the impact it has on individual characters and the whole community. Indeed, the matter of belongingness is highly influenced by mother figures, as they represent the sense of home, protection and bond with one's traditional values. Furthermore, motherhood and family connection represent the key to find individual identity, in a process to reconnect to one's roots. As reported by writer Paula Gunn Allen "mother's identity is the key to your own identity"¹⁰, the aspect of identity discovery is deeply defined in relation to one's mother and her identity. In particular, this aspect is crucial in Ojibwe culture: mother is represented in many traditional metaphors with earth, an element that connects Chippewa members to their traditions, lands, and values. As shown in Erdrich's book, kinship is the network that guides characters to find the place and the people they belong with, like a mother's inseparable love and protection. Therefore, motherhood is an essential part in such a process, even in cases where there is no blood relationship.

Readers can notice the strong desire of motherhood and creating a lasting bond in the community thanks to Marie Kashpaw. She uses great maternal instinct spreading her help and support to many children who were abandoned in the Chippewa tribe.

10 Allen 1992, pp. 278.

Her behavior contributes to the creation of a strong sense of community and support within the tribe, adding up to her desire to provide protection to the younger generation. Erdrich also explores the theme of maternal love extending beyond biological ties.

Lulu held a profound desire to connect with her mother, especially at a young age. She wished to find herself by reconnecting with Fleur Pillager, authentic Ojibwe mother. Her need of a guide is expressed in her words:

I needed my mother the more I became like her – a Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes, a surprising heart¹¹.

Gaining awareness about her Indian heritage made her become a mother of many children.

Not all women had a positive result in covering the mother role. June had issues with it, which brought her to a total physical and spiritual separation from the reservation. She tried to find her identity within the dominant American culture, however she denied her responsibility as mother. Her absence during her son King and Lipsha's lives can be justified by the lack of connection that she always felt in her life. The theme of absent mother is haunting in the book and it can be found in the reconnection of the Kashpaw family and especially in Lipsha's journey. A family can repair the separation through awareness of one's history, reunions and forgiveness.

Bringing June home is Lipsha's way of helping her to heal, even after death. June's spirit can now be put to rest because her son has accepted her and through him she will find the connection that she lost and healing that she needs¹².

11 Erdrich 2004, pp. 71.

12 Sanders 1998, pp. 153.

3.2 Native American religion and spirituality in the novel

The process of self-discovery and recognizing a sense of belongingness are central themes in *Love Medicine*. The journey needs to be paired in the Ojibwe context with spirituality and the relationship that characters have with religion. Characters heal themselves and their loved ones through spirituality and reconnecting with ancestral sets of values. Native American traditions are essential in such a process, those that had been oppressed and substituted with Christianity. Authentic Ojibwe practices, such as the reverence for nature, are depicted emphasizing the special spiritual connection that some of the characters hold. In the novel, Ojibwe's spirituality is manifested through various rituals, prayers and traditional medicine. These practices are closely intertwined with the characters' daily lives and play a key role in their sense of identity. The author emphasizes the importance of transmission of spiritual traditions through generations. However, Erdrich does not idealize Native American spirituality or regard it as the only valid form of religion. In the novel, other religious manifestations are also presented, such as the Catholic religion brought by European missionaries. This duality between Ojibwe spirituality and Catholic religion is integral to the lives of the characters. Many of them follow both paths or find themselves torn between the two. This dichotomy explores the conflict between tradition and modernity, between Native culture and the imposition of a dominant culture. The influence of Christianity, brought by European colonizers, is also the most evident proof of assimilation in white culture. Christianity, primarily Catholicism, is depicted throughout the story, representing the religious upheaval that affected Native communities. Characters like Sister Leopolda and Sister Mary Martin highlight the tension and complexities of reconciling Ojibwe spirituality with the Christian faith imposed upon Indians. This duality of beliefs highlights the ongoing struggle of Native Americans to maintain their cultural and spiritual identities in the face of outside influence, while also emphasizing the power of faith

and spirituality as guiding forces in the characters' lives, shaping their decisions, values and connections with one another.

An element that represents the influence and impactful presence of Catholicism in Native Americans' lives is June's rosary. It is the only possession that June has when she first goes to live with Marie and Nector Kashpaw, after her mother's death. The young girl wears the rosary on her neck, as a symbol of connection to her mother, and her mother's connection to Catholic religion. However, June doesn't know its meaning related to Christianity and white assimilation, but it connects the girl to her mother and her origins. Marie takes June's rosary from her neck and places it in a lard can in her kitchen. On the day when June expresses her desire to live with Eli, Marie allows June to make that choice. However, as she speaks, Marie discreetly touches the rosary's beads in the lard can. In this secret gesture, Marie silently prays for June to remain with her, since she loved her more than her own children. This scene underlines the melting of the two creeds: Marie wasn't used to praying in the Catholic manner, however she decides to occasionally rely upon a Christian symbol. Later in the narration, the rosary reappears in Marie's hands, who had kept it for years. She decides to hand it to Lipsha, giving him the possibility to finally connect with his biological mother June and find his identity.

In the chapter "Saint Marie" the theme of religion is central. The Western Catholic religion and its violent imposition to Native Americans is represented by Sister Leopolda. She uses verbal and physical violence on her alumna, Marie Lazarre, who went to 'Sacred Heart Convent'. The young girl tried to define her identity through Catholicism. Her family was viewed negatively in the reservation and her skin was too pale (since she was a mixed-blood) in comparison to the Indian standard. Therefore, she never felt accepted and fought to find a way to define herself in the society. She was determined to become the first saint of the reservation, giving up her Native heritage and fully convert to Christianity. Religion is fundamental to her in this part in order to find belongingness in an environment and establish her identity.

Sister Leopolda, who embodies white racism toward the Indians, wants to erase the Native essence from Marie's soul, defining it as the 'Dark one' or 'Devil'. She believes that once Marie would give up her Indian heritage she could reach God: "She will shine," said Leopolda, "when we have burned off the dark corrosion."¹³ Marie for a period was convinced of this theory, until she escapes and also thanks to Nector rely her identity fully on the Native American soul. She belongs to the Kashpaws, and she is finally able to become a mature Ojibwe woman, embodying all tribal values.

Sister Mary Martin's character in the chapter "Crown of Thorns" exemplifies the intricate interplay of spirituality and cultural adaptation within the novel's narrative. She embodies the Catholic faith, symbolizing the dominant Western influence that seeks to aid Native Americans, appearing in a more positive light when compared to the earlier oppressive character of Sister Leopolda. Nevertheless, Mary's attempt to assist Gordie through compassion and help ultimately proved unsuccessful, as she struggled to comprehend his viewpoint. Her limitations derived from an inability to see beyond her own cultural framework, preventing her from recognizing the meaning of an animal's death as profoundly as a Ojibwe person might perceive it. This part of the narration underlines the cultural conflict that remains in North America, and its difficulties in encountering a balance.

In addition, Erdrich explores the concept of spirituality as an element of healing. Traditional medicine is described as a spiritual art that goes beyond the mere physical treatment of illness. It involves both body and spirit, seeking to restore both inner and outer balance. Ojibwe people's belief is based on the idea that everyone was born as "empty" and for this reason there is an important social expectation to "fill" one's mind through spirituality. In the community, the encouragement is to pursue a spiritual journey in order to be able to heal and connect with supernatural dimension, especially before the assimilation. The spiritual aspect of medicine is particularly evident in the elder characters in the novel, who possess a deep

13 Erdrich 2004, pp. 54.

knowledge of nature and traditional healing practices, like Fleur Pillager. The greatest example of the belief in spiritual medicine is the 'Love Medicine', used by Lipsha in order to save Nector and Marie's relationship and his family. This old and special tool is typical of Native ancestral spirituality. The love medicine ritual underlines the importance of the resilience of love and loyalty within the Ojibwe culture. Forgiveness and faith are two crucial elements that support Native spirituality. Lipsha's belongingness to the culture makes him able to search and create his medicine, which apparently seem magical and unrealistic in a modern and Western point of view. However, "in many Native American beliefs the "magic" is part of the natural world, an expected attribute of people gifted with the touch"¹⁴, like Lipsha Morrissey. Magic is completely included in Ojibwe's society daily life, as a powerful tool to support their desires. This idea goes against Christian creed, where the only supernatural events are operated by God and considered "miracles": this creates a neat division between people and God/Saints. In contrast, in the Chippewa community the connection within the people is easier through a religion that allows them to tie with magic and medicine. Lipsha's perception on God and religion is underlined in the chapter "Love Medicine" where he expresses his untrust for Christian God depicted in the Bible: he forgot and unheard Indians abandoning them in a tragic cultural loss. However, he still finds faith in original Indian Gods:

Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around. They'll do a favor if you ask them right. (...) That makes problems, because to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewa once the Catholics gained ground¹⁵.

Lipsha underlines the importance of the connection with nature, Gods and spirituality in order to be able to understand it and to use its magical powers properly.

14 Sanders 1998, pp. 132.

15 Erdrich 2004, pp. 236.

In conclusion, Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* presents an in-depth analysis of spirituality and religion in the lives of Native American characters. The author was raised Christian, but she recognized the importance to reestablish the Ojibwe spirit in Chippewa people. She explores traditional practices, the conflict between tradition and modernity, the importance of spirituality as a means of healing and curing, and critiques organized religion. Louise Erdrich's purpose is not to reject Christianity completely, but to find a balance and healthy mediation with Indian spirituality.

3.3 Importance of memory, identity and belongingness

As explained in the previous chapters, the definition of identity of Native American characters is a process deeply influenced by the sense of belongingness to a community and the importance of memory to one's past origins and tradition. Indeed, in *Love Medicine*, characters build identity on personal connections, spirituality, family and landscape. Louise Erdrich describes a journey that leads characters to go backwards, towards their origins. It's essential for all Indigenous people to retrace their history and forgive previous generation traumas to overcome the haunting cultural loss. Raising awareness of the condition of Native American families in the post-modernity is a portal to rebirth of a community's identity. Native Americans need to regain respect within their context but also by Western society. Memory plays a central role in the narrative, revealing the complexity and richness of family relationships and characters' shared past. Memory becomes a way of tracing the history of these families and understanding their present. In addition, storytelling serves as a bridge between past and present. The characters' memories are intrinsically linked to their past experiences, and the narrative unfolds through the narration of events and situations that have shaped their lives. In the novel, memory is also revealed as a force capable of influencing the relationships between the characters. Thus, memory is an essence that creates deep connections between

people, providing them with a sense of belonging and a solid foundation for facing life's challenges.

Finally, memory is also a form of resistance against loss and forgetting. In facing hardship and tragedy, the characters seek refuge in their memory and find strength in the ability to remember. Thus, memory becomes an act of resilience and a form of self-determination, enabling the characters to retain their identity and preserve their history.

A clear example of this aspect are the memories about June. The Kashpaw family shared many conversations about June, keeping alive her legacy and finding a completely new bond despite her passing away. In *Love Medicine*, the bridge between generations and between a mother and her son is represented by Lipsha's journey, which determines his identity and raises awareness about his family. During the card game with his biological father, Lipsha affirms: "I dealt myself a perfect family"¹⁶ Lipsha's words resonate with a gratitude that goes beyond his winning poker hand, encompassing his deep acknowledgment for both his discovered biological family and his adoptive family. The intricate bond between tribe and family creates Lipsha's profound connection to an extended family.

Moreover, memory keeps alive the cultural and spiritual traditions of the Ojibwe community. Erdrich depicts the rituals, ceremonies and practices that constitute the cultural identity of this community. Memory becomes a tool for transmitting wisdom and knowledge, ensuring the continuity of traditions generation after generation. A noticeable element in the novel is the use of old Indian language in many occasions, which reminds of ancestral rituals and highlights the special connection that some of the characters have with their Ojibwe heritage.

Continuous separation and denial of Indian's heritage has caused irreversible loss of traditions, customs and beliefs. Moreover, as characters showed, Native Americans that aren't connected with their community and culture are bound to escape and

¹⁶ Erdrich 2004, pp. 358.

completely detach themselves from reservation life. Many of them attempt to be fully in white society, but forgetting and erasing their origins is impossible. Characters' sense of alienation and fragmentation of their families is a recurring aspect in Indians' lives. Louise Erdrich suggests many ways and elements to find the needed reconnection and create a new vision of identity. "Isolation induces physical distortion and collapse, connection and reunion allow a healing physical merging with others and with the external world."¹⁷

Examples like June and Albertine's showed issues in holding together their identity in a chaotic environment created by Western society. June's fragility and desire of physical connections made her open to others, however her limit kept her from reaching her homeland after the long walk. Also, Albertine seeks physical connection and help from strangers, walking around the city (narrated in the chapter titled "A Bridge"). Eventually she finds a profound mystical connection with the universe, and the landscape she lives in.

Northern lights. Something in the cold, wet atmosphere brought them out. I grabbed Lipsha's arm. We floated into the field and sank down. (...) Everything seemed to be one piece. The air, our faces, all cool, moist, and dark, and the ghostly sky. (...) All of a piece. As if the sky were a pattern of nerves and our thought and memories traveled across it. As if the sky were one gigantic memory for us all.¹⁸

This part describes her full mental and physical integration with the world, creating a magical atmosphere around her. Her vision and relation with her surroundings have a positive and healing influence on her identity.

As stated before, in defining one's identity, community is essential to integration, to create a balance between selfless individuals. However American Indians traditionally also value personal uniqueness and individual differences. Uplifting communal life doesn't necessarily mean to conceal individual features. It isn't comparable to Western concept of individualism. In white American society

17 Smith 1991, pp.16.

18 Erdrich 2004, pp. 34.

individualism is seen under a bright light and highly valued. It represents freedom and success. In addition, these results are even more celebrated if the person has achieved them alone. In *Love Medicine*, Marie Kashpaw goes through a series of events and radical changes regarding her identity. She overcomes these challenges by herself most of the time, highlighting her defining characteristics of rebelliousness, courage and desire of independence yet belonging to a safe environment.

Despite the conflicts and challenges, *Love Medicine* suggests that identity is not something definitive or static, but rather an ongoing process of self-discovery and acceptance. The characters in the novel face their personal demons and cultural roots, trying to find a balance between their Indian identity and the impact of individual experiences. In the end, the story shows that identity is not a matter of fine lines, but rather a complex web of connections and ties that weave together to create a unique person interconnected with his or her culture and history.

Ultimately, belongingness is something that Native American members cannot question when it comes to defining their own identity. Deny their essence and origins represent a loss and a detachment from reality. Embracing and embodying one's culture is the key to keep the old Native soul alive also in the present.

Conclusion

An analysis of *Love Medicine* offers a peculiar depiction on the lives of people belonging to the Chippewa community. It adds a signature way of expressing storytelling in literature, exploring universal themes such as love, death, alienation and identity. The novel is a profound and touching work that sheds light on an often-overlooked reality and invites readers to reflect on the complexities of being human and the family connections that shape everyone. *Love Medicine* gives us a unique perspective on the Native American experience, diving into the history, culture and spirituality of this community, through author's personal experience. Erdrich decides to express a complex variety of individuals, each one with their merits and flaws. Despite the differences and fragmentations that characterizes reservation's societies, the author underlines the urgency of acceptance, forgiveness and union, which still represent the key aspects to preserve family ties and accept others' fragilities.

The purpose of this thesis and of understanding *Love Medicine* is not only to increase awareness about Chippewa's culture and Native American literature, but to encourage the audience to empathize with different types of characters and reflect on familiar and social dynamics. Moreover, the journey of searching one's own identity inspire to meditate about historical events' influence on our lives and how we can still make choices to define our paths. The theme of belongingness is central for all human beings, who build their culture and essence on sharing, loving and communication. However, accepting to belong to a community can be hard for people like Indigenous people, because of the numerous genocides, violations and expropriations they experienced. The fear or insecurity of belongingness can make people escape, as Erdrich highlighted in the narration. However, we can't separate ourselves from our identity and our heritage. To live happily we need to belong to someone, to a family, to a community. Finally, the novel inspires to rethink individualism, especially the well-

seen U.S. one, offering a glimpse of community life and spiritual connection to nature and homeland.

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Riassunto

Il Rinascimento Nativo Americano ha marcato un momento fondamentale negli studi Anglo-Americani, in quanto ha permesso la rappresentazione e diffusione di una cultura che per decenni è stata sottovalutata e oppressa. Il romanzo *Love Medicine* (1984), scritto da Louise Erdrich (autrice contemporanea e membro della comunità Chippewa), presenta ad un ampio pubblico una struttura basata sull'espressione della narrazione attraverso più voci differenti, quelle dei personaggi. La trama, che ha ricevuto critiche più che positive all'interno del suo contesto, esprime aspetti chiave riguardanti la riserva del Dakota del Nord e le persone che tutt'oggi mantengono la comunità viva.

Questa tesi inizia con una presentazione della storia dell'esperienza nativa americana dalla 'scoperta' del 'Nuovo Mondo' al Rinascimento Nativo Americano, passando attraverso il tragico genocidio, elemento necessario per comprendere a fondo il trauma storico subito dalle popolazioni originarie. In particolare, è essenziale una descrizione della situazione socio-politica e geografica del territorio statunitense pre-colonizzazione. La descrizione delle comunità Indigene che abitavano il Nord America viene affrontata accantonando le false o limitate narrazioni che durante i secoli di espansione da parte degli eserciti europei, venivano diffuse nel 'Vecchio Continente'. Infatti l'idea europea riguardo alle popolazioni non era realistica, oltre al fatto che contribuiva al pensiero razzista, alla violenza e all'oppressione di quelle popolazioni. La distruzione delle strutture sociali e culturali indigene vengono analizzate attraversando i programmi politici di espansione dei governatori statunitensi durante il diciottesimo e diciannovesimo secolo. In particolare, Thomas Jefferson e in seguito Andrew Jackson, hanno ricoperto un ruolo decisivo nel genocidio e sottomissione di innumerevoli comunità nativo-americane presenti nel territorio americano. La colonizzazione delle terre ancestrali native raggiunge il suo

apice con la cosiddetta ‘Legge per la rimozione degli indiani’ (‘Indian Removal Act’) emanata nell’anno 1830 dal presidente Jackson. Da quel momento è iniziata una serie di procedure con il fine di rimuovere fisicamente le popolazioni native americane dai loro territori originari. Le popolazioni venivano violentemente strappate dalle loro case per essere trasferite nelle riserve, ovvero luoghi destinati alla loro vita isolata dal resto della nuova società statunitense. La deportazione forzata delle tribù ha causato eventi traumatici come il ‘Sentiero delle Lacrime’ (‘Trail of Tears’), cammino che ha causato la morte di migliaia di persone e che ha segnato negativamente la memoria delle popolazioni per generazioni.

Il difficile passato ha stimolato un desiderio di rinascita e riaffermazione della cultura indigena attraverso la letteratura. In particolare, l’esempio di *Love Medicine* sottolinea fattori caratterizzanti come l’importanza della memoria e il desiderio di appartenenza ad una comunità solida, nella ricerca della propria identità. L’autrice del romanzo, Louise Erdrich, è nata nel 1954 in Minnesota e cresciuta in Nord Dakota, a stretto contatto con la comunità Ojibwe. Il contesto ha fortemente influenzato la sua passione per la scrittura, in particolare nelle tecniche e temi trattati nei suoi scritti. Infatti il suo bagaglio culturale le ha permesso una bilanciata mediazione tra la cultura post-moderna occidentale e le tradizioni native americane che ha appreso dalla madre e dal nonno. Inoltre Erdrich inserisce nei suoi lavori molti aspetti autobiografici, che richiamano la memoria e il passato della comunità nativa alla quale lei stessa appartiene. L’importanza di mantenere viva e esprimere l’essenza della cultura Chippewa è uno dei principali obiettivi della scrittura dell’autrice e nello specifico di *Love Medicine*. Quest’ultima è un’opera complessa, composta da diciotto capitoli, scritti seguendo un ordine cronologico non lineare. Si tratta di un insieme di storie brevi narrate da una dozzina di personaggi diversi che si ritrovano ad essere tutti collegati da legami familiari, amorosi e di appartenenza. L’autrice presenta una trama ricca di una grande diversità di circa venti individui che attraversano esperienze di vita fino a trovare la loro appartenenza a una famiglia

allargata, un'identità e una comunità condivisa. Ai lettori vengono presentati diversi pezzi della storia raccontata dai protagonisti nella maggior parte dei capitoli in prima persona, in una narrazione che cronologicamente inizia nel 1934 e termina nel 1984. La trama, ambientata principalmente nella riserva del North Dakota, comprende gli eventi riguardanti principalmente quattro famiglie Ojibwe: i Kashpaw, i Lamartine, i Pillagers e i Morrissey. Attraverso esperienze di vita differenti, i personaggi vengono presentati come individui alla ricerca della loro identità nella riserva. L'analisi dei personaggi e delle loro scelte permette di scoprire in profondità tratti caratteriali, portando ad una completa comprensione delle difficoltà che affrontano, in particolare nella connessione con la loro cultura originaria. Inoltre la presentazione dei personaggi è caratterizzata dallo stile di scrittura che permette di dar voce direttamente ai personaggi nella spiegazione degli eventi della trama. Questa tecnica di narrazione, come anche l'utilizzo di metafore, simbolismi e ironia, richiama la tipica tradizione nativo-americana della narrazione orale di storie e ricordi della comunità.

Il senso di legame e appartenenza sono aspetti ricorrenti e fortemente ricercati dai membri delle famiglie all'interno della narrazione. La religione, la spiritualità e i ruoli femminili sono temi affrontati attraverso le vite dei personaggi, che richiamano l'essenza culturale e il desiderio di appartenenza. In particolare ristabilire il ruolo della donna, che durante il corso della storia ha subito profondi cambiamenti, rappresenta uno dei principali obiettivi per le figure femminili del romanzo. Le donne descritte in *Love Medicine* mostrano l'importanza della loro indipendenza, forza e resilienza attraverso la scoperta della loro identità e lo stabilire il loro posto nella società in patriarcale in cui vivono. Sono rappresentate come figure matriarcali, che detengono un potere notevole all'interno delle loro famiglie, che tengono unite grazie al loro perdono e amore. Inoltre, il romanzo esplora il rapporto tra le credenze tradizionali indigene e la fede cattolica introdotta dai colonizzatori europei. I personaggi mostrano la complessità della loro identità culturale e la lotta per

mantenere le proprie tradizioni adattandosi alle influenze esterne imposte nell'epoca della colonizzazione. Nello specifico, il tema della spiritualità in *Love Medicine* serve a ricordare la lotta continua delle comunità indigene per preservare il loro patrimonio culturale. Erdrich sottolinea l'importanza di rispettare le due credenze e trovare una mediazione tra loro.

Infine, i concetti di identità, memoria e appartenenza sono concetti chiave che emergono attraverso le vite interconnesse della comunità Ojibwe. Ogni personaggio costruisce relazioni ed esperienze che appaiono profondamente radicate nella storia condivisa e nel patrimonio culturale della tribù. I ricordi del passato si tramandano di generazione in generazione, plasmando il presente e influenzando la vita e il senso di identità dei personaggi, mentre cercano di conciliare le loro credenze tradizionali Ojibwe con la realtà della società contemporanea. Inoltre, il concetto di appartenenza è profondamente significativo, in quanto i personaggi riescono a trovare conforto nella loro comunità, creando legami forti con le loro famiglie e persone all'interno del contesto nativo. Louise Erdrich inoltre esplora la particolare interazione tra identità personale, memoria collettiva e appartenenza alla comunità, evidenziando l'importanza di preservare il proprio patrimonio culturale.