

# Troubled and Troubling Reimagining Life of Chippewa People: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

**Mrs. G.K. Jayasre, M.A., M.Phil. (Ph.D.)**

**Research Scholar**

**Madurai Kamaraj University**

**Madurai**

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## Abstract

Karen Louise Erdrich renowned as one of the most prolific, well known and successful contemporary writer in American Literature. Erdrich as a member of Turtle Mountain Chippewa, she narrates about the life of two families in her novel *Love Medicine*, who arise from two different traditions. *Love Medicine* pictures characters seeking a healthy balance among seemingly diametrically opposed cultures. A clear life of Chippewa community and their survival sufferings to prevent their communal place in the reservation is well pictured in this novel. *Love Medicine* mainly focuses on multigenerational as well as multicultural connection of these two Native American Indian families. This paper makes an interpretation of how Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* clearly pictures a troubled and troubling reimagining of life of Chippewa people on Turtle Mountain Reservation. Erdrich sensitively pictures her characters difficulties and their struggles to hold their place in the reservation.

**Keywords:** Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*, Chippewa, Cultural Conflict, Reservation.

Karen Louise Erdrich, one of the most distinctive figures in contemporary American literature, also in contemporary Native American literature, in that her writing has met with both critical and popular success. Louise Erdrich's well acclaimed novel, *Love Medicine*, was published in 1984, won that year of the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Love Medicine* which also received, among other honors, the Los Angeles Times Award for Best Novel of the same year, the Janet Kaufman Award for Best First Novel, and the Virginia McCormack Scully Prize for Best Book featuring Indians or Chicanos. Two years earlier, "The World's Greatest Fishermen" *Love Medicine*'s first chapter was awarded the Nelson Algren Prize for short fiction, and one more chapter, "Scales," had been printed in The Best American Short Stories of 1983. A national best-seller, *Love Medicine* also hastily made its way onto the syllabus in most of the literature classrooms.

Erdrich's *Love Medicine* was plotted around journeys, encounters, and the instance of departure and return that draws its several characters efforts to find where it was, they might

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belong. The novel's main central setting, an Ojibwa reservation that borders the mythical town of Argus, North Dakota, serves as the locale of all the major character's succession of their arrival and their departure. In their quests to identify a peculiar place that was home, *Love Medicine's* characters must pass the difficult terrain of a cultural and mythical landscape that has been imprinted with the heritages of both Native American and Non-Native tradition.

A fabulist storyteller has come along to roll a mythic tales of the American Indian life experience in this age of colliding cultures and mythical folklores. Karen Louise Erdrich's novel, *Love Medicine*, was the beginning of an odyssey - continued in her *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *Tracks* (1988) – through the heartbreak and tragedy of a fictional but also very much contemporary to North Dakota reservation. It was a setting of windswept plains beset by bleak and sleepy winters, sprinkled with both bleak and disintegrating little communities, and seemingly bleaker prospects for each and every individual who usually inhabit them. Despite the fragmentation and disillusionment that sweep over their lives, Erdrich's characters come alive, emerging as real people who are in the end not only able to survive their circumstances, but trying to overcome the devastating effects of their bitter reality which has been forcibly imposed upon them.

Erdrich one of the member of Turtle Mountain Chippewa, she efficiently narrates about the lives of two different families in this novel *Love Medicine*, who arise from two various traditions. Her novel *Love Medicine* pictures how characters seeking a healthy balance among seemingly diametrically opposed cultures. A crisp and clear life of Chippewa community and their survival, sufferings to prevent their communal place in the reservation is well pictured in this novel. *Love Medicine* mainly focuses on multigenerational as well as multicultural connection of these two Native American Indian families. This article makes an interpretation of how Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* clearly pictures a troubled and troubling reimagining of life of Chippewa people on Turtle Mountain Reservation. Erdrich sensitively pictures her characters difficulties and their struggles to hold their place in the reservation.

In general the Chippewa are also known as Ojibway, Ojibwa, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, or Anishinaabe. The word "Chippewa" was a mispronunciation of "Ojibwa," a native word that translates loosely as "puckered," blindly believed to be a reference to the puckered seams found on the moccasins worn by the individual tribe. The Chippewa people call themselves as "Anishinaabe," which means, the native people of the native land. They are members of the Algonquin language family, who shares similarities with the languages spoken by the Cree, Potawatomi, Blackfeet, and Cheyenne. Algonquin-speaking tribes today stretch as far south as North Carolina, and west into the Rockies.

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Early histories of the Chippewa place the tribe as far north as Canada's Hudson Bay. Around 900 A.D., they have moved to westward, mounting into the woodlands of Canada, Michigan, and Minnesota. Later, some Chippewa also moved into North Dakota and Montana. The land of the Chippewas was highly rich in minerals and their land was fertile. The Chippewa were successful fur traders with many countries like the French and British. The fur trade resulted in intermarriages between the Chippewa and Cree and European fur traders, which strengthened alliances between the groups.

The Chippewa also fought alongside the French in the French and Indian War, and also with the British during the War of 1812. During 1815 they began to formalize a special series of treaties with the U.S. government, ceding control of huge tracts of land in exchange for the guarantee of reservation for the lands and for other services too. But unlike many other tribes, the Chippewa were not forced to migrate away from the homelands they had established centuries earlier, although a few groups did eventually move farther west, to newly established reservations in the Dakotas.

In 1882, President Chester Arthur, who established the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota in which Louise Erdrich was a member. Today's Chippewa live both on reservations and in rural areas and large urban centers. People who living on the reservation may face issues like unemployment, due to the instability of seasonal jobs like forestry or trapping for income. In recent times reservations have successfully developed business operations, from manufacturing to tourism to casino development, and for other sources of income.

The novel set on a North Dakota reservation, the stories focus on relations between three Chippewa families, the Kashpaws and their relations, the Lamartine/Nanapush, and the Morrisey families. The novel opens in the year 1981 with a young charming college student's return to the reservation on the occasion of the death of the character June Kashpaw. Coming home she sees clearly the pain and devastation the years have wrought on her entire family, and struggles in her first-person narrative to include what force or attraction in that situation would force her aunt June to set out for her home across an empty, snow-covered field on the night she froze to death.

The stories that follow examine the relations between these families and in so doing focus on three major characters Marie Lazarre, a very strong-willed woman of great sporting spirit and beauty whose sense of principle is founded on feelings of deficiency that have bedeviled her all her entire life. Lulu Lamartine, a woman of passionate power, who learned early in her life of the frailty of the flesh and its enormous power to heal life's pain and redeem its guilt; and Nestor

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Kashpaw, a man of good looks and popular and well good appeal, who was irresistibly drawn to Lulu, but marries Marie. We meet Marie Lazzare and come to understand her need for a 'love medicine,' a medicine which would create love, a love that would be a medicine.

The Chippewa Indians in Love Medicine have not lost their native tribal identity, as a non-Indian reader might expect which was based a historical treatment and modern-day circumstances. Lulu and Nector both were sent to the nearby government boarding schools off the reservation, in a practice that was prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet both of these two major characters return to the reservation rather than embracing the western Christian life hood that has been drilled into them, often through corporal punishment. The lasting effect of their education was not assimilation, but a desire to raise huge families that, while involved in American life, also kept their traditional ways intact.

Marie who also undergoes a transformation, she looks white and aspires to life with the nuns; she seems, thus, to reject her own tribal heritage. Yet by the end of this novel Marie has fully embraced Chippewa life, so much so that Lyman considers her as one of the "traditional." She speaks the Chippewa language frequently as well as fluently, partly motivated by her own observations of how the BIA and Catholicism have failed her children.

To create a good future for all her children, she connects with her cultural past. In apparent contrast to these two women, Lyman appears to have fully assimilated and sold out. He works for the BIA and owns an independent factory that produces high-quality Chippewa trinkets. When his factory fails, he forms a new different plan that does not involve exploiting his native heritage. He decides to unlock a casino, which was oddly in line with traditional chance-based on Chippewa culture and which will use the laws of the federal government to the advantage of Lyman's community for the first time.

The Chippewa culture has historically played games of chance in order to redistribute wealth and resolve all the quarrels at the end of the novel. Chance was the central element in the events of Love Medicine. June takes a chance on Andy at the bar on the night she dies. Nector and Marie become acquainted and fall in love thanks to a chance encounter in which they literally run into each other, barreling down the hill from the convent. When Nector dumps Lulu for Marie, Lulu moves on in life by taking changes with love. Chance then brings Nector and Lulu together in middle age: their first encounter after years revolves around a broken truck, tubs of unrefrigerated butter, and the chance that will Lulu drive by in an air-conditioned car and that Nector will have the courage to talk to her.

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The theme of chance was also linked to attempts to improve Chippewas cultural life. At the end of the novel, Lyman tries to figure out a way to use federal reservation laws to the tribe's advantage. He will open a casino and bring in people (and money) from hundreds of miles around. Besides everything gambling plays into the ancient Chippewa tradition of chance games. Thus, Lyman will use "luck and greed" to get ahead in the world, both for himself and for his community

Next in the terms of religion, especially Catholic Christ was a recurring force throughout the book. Gordie was presented in Christ-like terms, having created his own crown of thorns, as he puts it. His mother Marie even hopes that he will rise on the third day after a Lysol binge and be resurrected. When the young Marie goes to the Sacred Heart convent, Sister Leopolda pierces her hand with an iron and later pretends that Marie's wound is a spontaneous stigma. In *Love Medicine*, the numerous references to drowning may also refer to Christian baptism. Christian culture and their heritage have a significant impact among the characters.

Survival of Chippewa people in different contexts was an important theme in *Love Medicine*. Most of the characters are survivors, in one sense or another, though conditions of survival have changed. Rushes Bear, old Nanapush, Eli, and Moses come from a time of epidemics and they have received government land claims. Lulu, Nector, and Marie come from the era of institutionalization of Indian children through government schools and churches, a process intended to remove these young people from their independent cultural heritage and force them to assimilate. The youngest generation survives in different ways. Gerry was a political activist, Albertine was only half Indian but is being raised in full sight of her heritage, Lipsha embraces his traditional healing powers, and Lyman's casino plans preserve the heritage of games of chance. The circumstances that the characters must live through are different, and each of their stories presents a different set of survival tactics and a different perspective on survival by holding their native Chippewa culture.

*Love Medicine's* survivors are interconnected to their land, but Erdrich's novel was primarily interested in their connections to one another. It was only through their stories that characters account for being related with others, and it was her use of a narrative strategy that relies on this device through which Erdrich subtly shapes her novel's vision of community. In the individual tales within the chapters, readers tend to learn about the characters' loves and hatreds and of their desires and regrets. When the stories they have told are then retold or elaborated by others, the web of connections which defines the world as a community was gradually evolved, and the readers can see that each and every single story takes the shape of a pattern within the

book's overall story. All the characters troubled a lot to stick on to their native Chippewa culture which uplifts *love medicine* as a cultural masterpiece.

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