
RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Forget to Forgive: Mother-Child Relationship in *Love Medicine*

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ABSTRACT

Mother-child relationship has not received sufficient attention from scholars in studying Louise Erdrich's works, but the mother plays a vital role in children's identity search. This paper aims to find out the mother-child relationship in Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine*. Close reading is applied in the research, and American native traditions and customs are adopted in the analysis. The paper finds that native children go through the process of choosing to forget to finally forgive their mothers in their identity search and construction.

KEYWORDS

Self-identification, mother-child relationship, American native, identity construction

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1. Introduction

Like William Faulkner and his Yoknapatawpha County, Louise Erdrich has created her own mythical landscape in and around Argus, a fictional Red River Valley reservation town, and has also manufactured an eccentric cast of characters who appear and re-appear throughout her many novels set there.

Much of the scholarship generally has had a tendency to provide historical and cultural contexts for readers unfamiliar with indigenous histories, cultures, and knowledge systems. Such as Julie Maristuen-Rodakowski presents a detailed analysis of Turtle Mountain Reservation history, Erdrich's treatment of it in *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*, and Turtle Mountain residents' linguistic practices. (Julie, 2000) Catherine M. Catt discusses the Trickster, a mythological figure that Erdrich often uses in her fiction. (Catt, 1991) Some focus on her mixed identities and multiple narratives. James Ruppert, for instance, discusses Erdrich's inevitable mediation of Native and non-Native American knowledge systems, which forces each reader to see through the author's cultural lenses. Some center on individual and cultural survival. Such as William Gleason presents a thorough catalog of the types, forms, and techniques of Erdrich's protean humor and illustrates how laughter is a survival technique.

Recent studies in Chinese journals focus on her latest novels, *LaRose* and *The Round House*. Besides the denounces of the failure of justice for Native females at the hands of white men and critical possibilities of a transethnic approach to sexist violence, self-identification and the identity construction of American Indian adolescents can also be seen. However, the parent-child relationship cannot be found through Erdrich turning to her own experience as a mother of six for her work *The Blue Jay's Dance* and retaining her focus on children with her first children's book, *Grandmother's Pigeon*, Published in 1996. Some reviewers averred that Erdrich's description of the maternal relationship was powerful, and the relationship between mother and child manifests in a similar pattern in her earlier fiction, such as *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace*. This article finds the maternal relationship pattern in these novels. The children finally forgive their mothers, although they choose to forget, even to hate them at first.

It is not difficult to find in these three novels that mothers leave their children consciously or unconsciously, though we get to know that the mother plays a vital role in the child's identity-seeking. In *Tracks*, Fleur leaves Lulu under the care of Nanapush, and Pauline leaves Marie to Bernadette Morrissey. In *Love Medicine*, June decides to draw Lipsha.

There is something similar between the three pairs: Pauline and Marie, June and Lipsha, Fleur and Lulu. Their biological fathers can be identified except for Lulu, while they are raised not by their natural parents but by another elder. Pauline seduces Napoleon and gives birth to Marie but leaves Marie to the widow Bernadette in *Tracks*. And we read about Marie living in the convent in *Love Medicine* before she abandons her dream to be a saint and marries Nector. Lipsha is the son of June and Gerry, but he gets to know from the narration of Zelda that June wants to draw him into the slough. He is saved by Zelda and raised by his grandma Marie. Similarly, another elder rather than her natural parents raise Lulu. Nanapush, who adopts her mother, Fleur raises her and gives her family name. Unlikely, it is not clear about Lulu's father except the clue we get from *Tracks* that her mother Fleur comes back pregnant from the butcher's in the town where she gambles with the men. What's more, Fleur leaves Lulu for the sake of Lulu's safety, which is different from Pauline and June's hatred and dislike towards their children.

2. Marie to Pauline

In *Tracks*, Pauline seduces Napoleon successfully and is pregnant. But, to avoid the "taint of original sin" on the illegitimate child she carries, Pauline refuses to cooperate in her delivery and chooses death for herself and her baby: "I shook with the effort, held back, reduced myself to something tight, round, and very black clenched around my child so that she could not escape" (T, 135). Bernadette Morrissey, who attends the delivery, must resort to violent measures in order to save the baby and mother.

Without knowing the relationship between Pauline and Marie in *Love Medicine*, the central conflict in "Saint Marie" reads like a legendary joust: a demented nun, Sister Leopolda (Pauline Puyrat in *Tracks* becomes Sister Leopolda in *Love Medicine*), sees herself as fighting the devil for control of Marie's soul and insurance of her salvation, while Marie can only regard such control as fatal. The contest is imaged in parodies of chivalric legend: Leopolda hurls her lance at the devil in the schoolroom coat closet and later engages in hand-to-hand fencing with a poker and fork. Marie's battle with Sister Leopolda also plays out the larger cultural conflict between European and Native ways of life, the contradictory aims of Christian colonizers having been to maintain power over colonized peoples while at the same time claiming to elevate them as "brothers in Christ." It is characteristic of the irony throughout Erdrich's story that although Sister Leopolda continually fasts, it is Marie who has the vision.

It is not clear whether Marie knows that Pauline is her mother in the narration. But it is definite that Marie is always waiting for the chance to take her revenge. Therefore, it is not our surprise twenty years later; she goes to the hill again with her well-dressed daughter Zelda. Even dying, Pauline never surrenders before Marie shows off. Sure, Marie also prepares to take in the fight when she sees the fork in Pauline's tight hand. Marie decides to lunge forward to take her off-balance and snatch the spoon from her when she kneels to receive Leopolda's blessing. But Leopolda didn't lift the right hand of her blessing, but the left hand gripping the iron spoon with her deathly strength to give a heavy blow. Then the mother and daughter lean into each other, balanced by hate. Finally, Marie knows that there is nothing she can do after hating her all these years, for Leopolda is sure to be placed alone under the deep mild earth soon, and thus the fighting stops as well as the hate.

3. Lipsha to June

In these novels, in which relationship is based on behavior rather than biology, June, Lipsha's biological mother, plays a double role, both as the witch who steals the miraculous child and as a very distant mother-figure who orients Lipsha's blood relationships with other members of the tribe. June's behavior most clearly mirrors that of the witch in "Oshkikwe's Baby." When Lipsha is an infant, she throws him in a slough in a gunnysack weighted with rocks, from which he is miraculously saved by Marie's daughter Zelda. This refusal to allow him to be informally adopted by her relatives, which Erdrich notes is quite common on the reservation, is a theft from relations who would bring up this child and later benefit from his miraculous powers. Growing up in the Kashpaw household, Lipsha would not have had an old-fashioned cradleboard but would probably have seen the dresser drawer he slept in later holding the family's clothing, witness to his part in the family history.

Another of the novel's parallels with the Anishinabe tale involves evidence of scars, physical and psychic. In the traditional story, Oshkikwe proves her maternity to the young baby-man by producing a piece of flesh bitten by the pup off the witch's buttocks. He then makes up an excuse to check his witch "mother" for scars. In a thematic parallel with the tale, Lipsha spends much time in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* pondering the pain and sorrow of June's life, contemplating her emotional scars (LM, 363-364; BP, 52-55, 257-58) and the reader is provided with a view of these scars that Lipsha will never have, the formative scene of her childhood rape (BP, 57-60). Seeing these psychic scars demonstrates to Lipsha and the reader that June is not his true mother because she is unable to act as one. Lipsha himself testifies to this fact: when told the slough story by Zelda, who pulled him out of the water, Lipsha insists, "No mother..." but cannot finish his statement (BP, 50). Evidence of her own mother's complicity in her

rape demonstrates that June has no model to guide her in motherly behavior. By the time she is brought to Marie, Marie cannot trust a mother figure at all, as manifested by the fact that she leaves Marie's house to live in the woods with her uncle Eli (LM, 92).

It is indicated in *Love Medicine* that Lipsha doesn't mind who his father is, and his mother is more important to his identity. The loss of a mother is a loss of culture, heritage, and self-identity. Therefore, Lipsha doesn't forgive his real mother and considers grandma Kapshaw his mother. Although Lipsha is not reared by June, the specter of his mother attempting to drown him haunts his life. And drowning is the worst death for a Chippewa to experience. There was no place for the drowned in heaven or anywhere on earth. (Allen, 1989)

This vision is validated in *The Bingo Palace* by Zelda's story and Lipsha's own memory of sinking to the bottom of the lake. Lipsha refuses to hear and shows his resentment towards his mother when Albertine comes close to tell him his mother's secret, saying, "Albertine, you don't know what you're talking about." He goes on to declare, "As for my mother... even if she came back right now, this minute, and got down on her knees and said, 'Son, I am sorry for what I did to you,' I would not relent on her" (LM, 39). Ultimately, Lipsha relents on her and forgives his mother for abandoning him. In the final line of the novel *Love Medicine*, Lipsha Morrissey speaks not of driving the car back to the reservation but of laying his mother to rest. 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; through him, she will find the connection she lost and the healing she needs. And by bringing her home, he will come home to knowledge of who he is. Lipsha's embrace of integration and his focus on the healing power of love come through his relationships with his family and the knowledge he gains through them.

4. Lulu to Fleur

In Nanapush's speech, it is heartless for Lulu not to call Fleur's mother and walk through the tough bush to visit her. Therefore, he wants to help them to reckon and look into one another's eyes again and bring the old times back. Nanapush tells Lulu about her mother, Fleur: "Maybe once I tell you the reason she had to send you away, you will start acting as a daughter should. She saved you from worse, as you'll see. Perhaps when you finally understand, you'll borrow my boots and go out there, forgive her, though it's you that needs forgiveness" (T, 210-211). In Nanapush's narration in *Tracks*, we get to know why Fleur leaves Lulu cared by him. "She sent you to the government school, it is true, but you must understand there were reasons: there would be no place for you, no safety on this reservation, no hiding from government papers, or from Morrissey who shaved heads or the Turcot Company, leveler of a whole forest. There was also no predicting what would happen to Fleur herself" (T, 219). And there is truth in his words, for we read about Fleur's love toward Lulu after the birth and her fear when she can't find Lulu. In the last chapter of *The Bingo Palace*, we find Lulu's child moccasins on the wall in Fleur's house, and Fleur takes them off the wall and puts them in her pocket. She only takes those things she carried with her all her life when she leaves the house. (BP, 272) Though Lulu's words toward her mother in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* can't be found, in *The Bingo Palace*, Lulu shows her attitude towards Fleur when Lipsha mentions without a preview. Apparently, Lulu hesitates to speak about her mother even when Lipsha insists on telling her the fact that Fleur is her mother. Lipsha says, both mad and reasonable: "you don't like to talk about the old lady, but she's your mother... Maybe I am ignorant, but if I had a mother here alive, at least I wouldn't hate her" (BP, 130) "I don't hate the old lady," Lulu says, pausing for a moment, evening her voice. "I understand her." (BP, 130) It is the only place we read Lulu's words toward her mother, and she wouldn't like to call Fleur a mother but "the old lady," though she claims that she understands Fleur.

Though dislike, hate, or misunderstanding between the mother and child live separately appear at the beginning, we see the understanding and forgiveness the children hold towards their mothers at last. It is the time to cure the wounds, and love helps the hurt and the lost recover to a complete realization and identity.

5. Conclusion

As one of the most active American Indian writers at present, Urdrick's works are never short of concerns about cultural identity and existential crisis. This paper aims to explore the mother-child relationship in Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* and finds that the children complete their identity construction by forgiving their mother to establish a connection with their family.

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