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### Postmodern Narrative Techniques Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine

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**Abstract:** The present study discusses the postmodern narrative technique in Louise Erdrich's novel Love Medicine. Though the novel is one of the richest models of postmodern literary writings, the paper confines itself to four prominent perspectives of postmodernism which are related, covertly or overtly, to the socio-political crisis of the Indian Americans or as they want to call themselves the Native Americans. Identity, fragmentation, postcoloniality and multi-narration are taken in focus to show how the mixed-blood writer Louise Erdrich has mixed the oral traditions of her tribe with the contemporary most recent narrative techniques to produce a landmark in the Western literary canon.

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تقنية السرد ما بعد الحداثة في رواية دواء الحب

<b>الخلاصة:</b>	<b>الكلمات المفتاحية :</b>
تناقش هذه الدراسة تقنية الرواية ما بعد الحداثة في رواية دواء الحب كارين لويس ادرج. على الرغم من أن الرواية هي واحدة من أغنى نماذج الكتابات الأدبية ما بعد الحداثية ، إلا أن البحث يقتصر على أربعة منظورات بارزة لما بعد الحداثة التي ترتبط ، بشكل سري أو علني بالأزمة الاجتماعية السياسية للأميركيين الهنود أو كما يريدون تسمية أنفسهم الهنود الحمر. يتم التركيز على الهوية ، والتجزؤ ، والتعددية اللغوية ، والسرد المتعدد لتوضيح كيف اختلطت الكاتبة المختلطة بالدم المختلطة ل كارين لويس بالتقاليد الشفهية من قبيلتها مع أحدث الأساليب السردية الحديثة لإنتاج علامة بارزة في القانون الأدبي الغربي.	- ما بعد الحداثة - الأمريكيين الأصليين - حب الطب معلومات البحث
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## 1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a complicated term which is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study. Though it is not easy to locate it historically, many scholars including Abrams suggested that the term is used frequently in the literature and art of post World War II, Western morale in the first war was affected greatly due to the atrocities of the Nazi, the atomic bomb threat, the deterioration of nature in general, and the intimidation of overpopulation (Abrams 168).

As its name suggests, Postmodernism seems to be in contrast to Modernism. This ideas does not mean that some aspects and trends of Modernism have continued within Postmodernity, but the different areas are almost in focus. Actually, “Modernism was preoccupied by a desire to portray subjective consciousness as more unstable and disorderly than previously thought” (Lindas4).

This distrust of totalizing mechanisms, Sharama illustrated;

extends even to the author and his own self-awareness; thus postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction to undermine the author's "univocation" (the existence of narrative primacy within a text, the presence of a single all-powerful storytelling authority). The distinction between high and low culture is also attacked with the employment of pastiche, the combination of multiple cultural elements including subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature. (189)

The eminent and most apparent causes of Postmodernity are by and large centered on the radical and quick changes in technology and science. This "rapid speed of change fundamentally altered the psyche of those living in the postindustrial, media-driven, pop-culture-flooded world. Individuals are no longer able to differentiate between virtual-reality and authentic reality because the virtual world is in effect the one now inhabited" (Lindas 5).

In literature, Ray Linn illustrated in his book *A Teacher's Introduction to Postmodernism* (1996), postmodern writers have "abandoned the modern starting point that the novelist must first hold a mirror up to nature and the reader must be presented with an orderly story in which events are presented in a logical way, with a beginning, middle, and end" (80). In postmodern technique, "the narrative is broken, tangled, and filled with repetition, and we learn about the main character's death before we learn about the last few years of his life" (94). Many other techniques are introduced in postmodern fiction such as metafiction, intertextuality, fragmentation, postcolonial perspectives ...etc. Erdrich's *Love Medicine* is one of the master pieces of the postmodern canon which encouraged the researcher to trace some of the postmodern elements displayed in the novel.

## **2. Postmodern Narrative Technique in *Love Medicine***

### **2.1. Fragmentation**

Pluralism and multiplicity, as postmodern trends moved the writers to try new patterns of literary writing. It, directly or indirectly, allowed them to create fictions with multiple narrative styles of representations. One of these narrative techniques is fragmentation which breaks with the traditional mode of portraying events in a narrative. Most readers are usually familiar with the chronological order of recording events and situations so that they are mostly aware of what they are dealing with. But many postmodern writers have challenged the readers expectations with unfamiliar modes such as multiple ending, in this case the reader is left to decide the

ending, out of more than one option according to his satisfaction (Abootalebi 72), the text is divided into short parts or divisions, separating these parts by different kinds of separators (72). Louise Erdrich is a leader in this respect, and *Love Medicine* is a remarkable example.

Erdrich employed the fragmented form in *Love Medicine*, Garcia stated, “to emphasize the emotionally fragmented characters as representations of a tribe working to piece together what remains of their culture after being forced to assimilate” (2). As a result of this novel and shocking style, *Love Medicine* was under attack by some critics and reviewers, particularly at the early stage, claiming that it cannot be considered as a novel. It is, they argued, a frustrated narrative lacking a consistent main character and a developing plotline to follow. Gracia discussed such reaction and wittily justified:

The language and research for identifying short story cycles and composite novels was not widely acknowledged or known at the release of *Love Medicine* (1984), leading early critics, like Newsweek reviewer Gene Lyons, to discredit Erdrich’s work, declaring that, “no matter what the dust jacket says, it’s not a novel... her inexperience as a storyteller shows throughout,” (qtd. in Schultz). However, the research that followed on multi-narration and fragmented form clarifies that it is twentieth century works like *Love Medicine* that made the composite novel a mature genre that is still employed today. (3)

Gracia defended fragmentation in *Love Medicine* and called this innovative style a short story cycle. She believed that this new technique fits the genre requirement of self-standing or independent pieces compiled to tell a larger story and permits for texts like Erdrich’s to serve as fictional revisionist history. Multiple narrators of the story/history of Native American family/community from different perspective give the reader clearer image of the situation of the ethnic crisis of that group of American Society. Thus the stories are close to the Ojibwe oral storytelling tradition and successful to encompass a history about the land, the people, and the relationship between the two that Euro-Americans have never been able to fully comprehend. In this cooperative style *Love Medicine*’s characters share their stories, in the form of oral histories, local myths, and family fictions, often [creating] a contestable version of events. In order to offer a “realistic” version of Ojibwe existence... Erdrich creates a tension similar to that surrounding crisis of history and identity, a true struggle for survival that Ojibwe experienced particularly in the late nineteenth century through the twentieth and continue to feel today. (Cited in Gracia 4)

## **2.2.Identity**

Erdrich can be considered as one of the descendants of what have been called by Gerald Vizenor ‘the postindian warriors’ because she used her pen to defend the Native Americans identity. Following her ancestors who resisted the European dominance, she used literature to create new ways for the original people to express themselves and was very successful at narrating stories which overtly resist the Native American stereotypes. She wrote novels which reflected the Native American life in the twentieth century, amongst them is *Love Medicine*, and created characters men and women white, Indian and mixed blood heritage.

In the twentieth century, thinkers, writers, scholars and political activists started to raise questions related to the American Indians identity. Perry G. Horse, for example, assumed that American Indians (he preferred to use the term Native Americans) have many cultural aspects , such as ethnic terminology, racial feelings, the legislative status of American Indian nations and Indian people, a different culture, the modern society’s attitude towards being a Native American (61-62). He thoroughly discussed these elements and came up with a shocking conclusion to the American society: division into castes is a characteristic of the American society due to their dominance by oppression. Whether or not the Whites are overtly racist, they benefit from their race. In America, Indians fight for gaining their identity in a white controlled environment(66).

Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* is a collection of stories covering three age groups, half a century, and some families, and with eight narrators. It wittily images the life of Native Americans who had been ousted of their country and the subsequent fates of their succeeding peers. It further explores the bounds of family and faith that preserve both the Chippewa tribal community and the individuals that comprise it. Louise displays the terrible life of Indian Americans through the discrimination practiced the whites against the native American in her writings but in a distinctive style and deep sense of humor which enables her to defend her community’s identity without directly attacking the whites’ unfair dominance. Thomas Matchie was fascinated by this style in *Love Medicine* when he comments saying that *Love Medicine* is something especial in the literature of Native American. It is not argumentative. There is no grievance to express and no accusation leveled at the Whites. This is nothing but an account of Indian life with all its features . It is Erdrich’s expression of her people’s life in a precise manner. (139).

Bo, in his article “The Plight of Contemporary Native Americans in *Love Medicine*”, discusses the Indian Americans’ identity crisis as reflected in *Love Medicine* on three grounds. He assumed that the loss of land is the beginning of the dilemma of Native Americans because they believed that land is their linkage with nature let alone it is their source of living (1665). The Native Americans were forced to leave their productive place in the east to the infertile place in the west and finally kept in limited reservations (1666). Through the story, despair is clearly shown that the miserable life is going on and on in Lulu’s complaining about moving a lot and shoved out on a lonely prominent round hill (Erdrich 282).

Beside the loss of their homeland, the Native Americans faced the challenge of changing their culture. The white government set out some legislations which undermined Native Americans’ religion and traditions. For example, they were compelled to use another language and culture which is not theirs and they are got used to it and even their children were to be educated according to the new culture from the very beginning of their lives (Bo 1666). Re-writers in these schools, Bo added that Indians are forced into the American life style with its complicated technologies telling them that they are primitive people with primitive culture and should stick to American new culture and lifestyle (1666). Through such orientation, the Indians are being deprived from their own identity for being adherent to American culture because they willy-nilly accept the White culture gradually and that is exactly what the Whites want. Referring to this important issue, may be covertly, Erdrich emphasizes, in many positions in *Love Medicine*, that Eli is the most skilful in reservation in hunting deer by using traps. Beside losing the ability of archery, the youngest generation mostly lost the terminology of their own Indian language. But Uncle Eli can be regarded as an exception because his mom refused to take him to the white school so he was stuck to the nature and purity of the reservation. He gained a respected place in the hearts of his beloved ones and his neighborhood . His life is very simple and it protects him against the new style of life.

The third aspect of identity crisis discussed by Bo is discrimination by the whites. All Indian symbols, he argues, like furs, long hair, killing animals in wilderness for food are savage acts (1666) in the white’s eyes and need to be changed. The white government’s strategy to solve this problem is to build schools for Indian children to merge them into American society. In spite of that, Indians are faced with the irresolvable problem of deep ethnic bias (Bo 1666). In *Love Medicine*, a good example in this sense is Nector. He accepted the American-style

education from a young age but still had to face intense racial discrimination. After graduation, he tried to work in the movies, but he was shocked to know that the destiny of the Indian actors in the moving theater was death (Erdrich 119). Even the most beautiful girl among Chippewa Indians, who decided to leave the reservation, failed to cope with the white society's discrimination.

Another important example of the search for identity in *Love Medicine* is reflected in some other characters like Marie and Lipsha . Marie wants to embrace a beautiful and powerful identity. She thought of the Church as a means of gaining power and prestige. She has the desire to become a saint because she associates martyrdom with power but she is unable to establish her identity as a nun which is part of the colonizer's culture. She has an ambition to become a political leader of her tribe. But as a female her independent power could not be viable in the Native American culture so she proves it through Nector. In the church she feels that life in convent with sister Leopolda is dust, so she leaves in search of health and identity.

Marie meets Nector and loses her virginity which shows her loss of any respected and active position in the convent. She loses her power and accepts man's privileged position. Later she marries Nector and becomes Mrs. Kashpaw, wife of the tribal leader. Marie tries to empower herself, first as a young girl when she tries to gain power through Catholicism, and later as a young woman, when she uses here position as wife and mother to show her confidence of herself. When she visits Leopolda, she tells her about the high position of her husband in the community. But as she finds Leopolda remains unimpressed, she begins self-exploration. After returning from the convent, she finds Nector's letter which says that he is leaving her for Lulu's sake. She feels that she should not depend on Nector. Now she has started forming her own identity as a pure mother like land. She is proud of her cultural heritage.

Lipsha, on the other hand, is a symbol of identity loss. He was searching for the identity of his parents. Once he discovers his mother's identity, starts his journey to know more about his father Gerry. Lulu, Lipsha's grandmother tells him about his biological parents: "you never knew who you were... I thought it was a knowledge that could make or break you" (245). When Lipsh discovers his parentage, he gets confidence and a new path to healing. This discovery also guides him to familial connection. He does his best to reconcile with his father Gerry which will support him with security and self-identity. He thus brings June home both symbolically and literally.

After finding out the truth about his true parents, Lipsha gains his sense of identity and also his sense of belonging within family and community. He is the medicine man for his generation. He is a healer. He has a sense of personal value and power. He says: “I know the tricks of mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it, because I got the touch. It’s a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask... The medicine flows out of me” (230-32). He finally tries to help Marie win back Nector from Lulu using his *Love medicine*. He fails because he takes a shortcut.

### **2.3. Storytelling**

One of the significant elements that makes Erdrich’s fiction unique is her narrative technique which is a combination of traditional oral narration and postmodern stories through merging various kinds of narrations. Uzumcu states that the writer makes her characters be as if face to face with the readers with real intimacy via sharing their accounts with their readers (46). The stories of her novels are narrated by her characters who are constantly telling their stories from their own perspectives; so that we may find stories which are narrated again and again through the novels but in different ways each time. A story is told differently in accordance with the point of view of the narrator as required by the narrator (Uzumcu 48). Erdrich’s novels, on the whole, illustrate the alienation of individual characters being alleviated through multiple narrators; the connection of characters by half-told stories and adapting of persons and societies to the time changes; and how a consecutive, disrupted narrative constructions that show the tranquility of a network of stories closely related presenting of individual firmness and folk persistence (Cited in Uzumcu 50).

Richard T. Stock aimed in his paper “Native storytelling and Native Innovation: Luise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* as Fictional Ethnography” to show that “narrative devices can be a part of a social and political debate in literature” (175). The novel stroke him as he confessed with its uniqueness in “transgressing some of the most basic narrative conventions, but still retaining a sense of a story for its readers” (177). One of the deviations from those conventions, is the absence of a main character and the diversity of points of view.

In another article, Stock (2016) explained in detail the postmodernity of *Love Medicine* on the level of narrative techniques and characterization. Conventionally, he suggests that there are



three kinds of characters: main, secondary and third-level characters (121). In addition, the lines of a story are organized in a hierarchy, regularly describing the significance of the characters in the lines. Hundreds of characters can be found in a story and several secondary characters, but only one main character, and the remnant is at a third level of importance (125). The story can be understood through the directed characters therein (125). The protagonist is the general instrument in narratives to deliver consistency and comprehension.

But *Love Medicine* is a challenge to these conventions. It is hardly difficult to answer a question like: Who is the protagonist in the novel? There are many possible characters which can fit the answer. And, hence, appears the uniqueness and novelty of Louise Erdrich's narrative techniques is revealed. According to stock, this is a particular inimitable success by Erdrich which is very difficult to be achieved, to satisfy the readers and the critics altogether which is no longer attainable since long ago (137).

Hudson, on the other hand, has linked Louise Erdrich's postmodern technique of story narration with the Native Americans concerns of identity and family. Erdrich, he assumed, "weaves together the narrative perspectives of various Ojibwe and European-American characters to depict generations of Native American history" (1). She used her characters, he added, to tell stories for three major purposes: "to uncover the secrets of their family histories, to understand themselves, or to pass on these histories to family members" (1). Therefore, Hudson assured, their "quests for identity and their explorations of family history have relevance for all readers. Erdrich's first-person narrators self-consciously construct their stories, and in doing so, they reveal the ways in which individuals uses stories to make sense of their lives and their families" (1).

Thus multiperspectivity as well as the removal of the omniscient narrative center in *Love Medicine* is one of the manifestations of postmodern plot. These features are also discussed by Osijek who believed that the novel "reworks and adapts postmodern conventions to attain the postcolonial effect of hybridity and anti-imperial translation" (115). Flashbacks, repetitions, and an accumulation of narrators, he illustrated, additionally loosen the narrative linearity and unity of the individual chapters and the novel as a whole. These characteristics, he added, "indicate the postmodern procedures of discontinuity, permutation, contradiction, and even excess (cf. Lodge 273-283), since the same events are often fractured into several narrative angles and, as

Silberman contends, a main hero or focalizer does not exist (104). Besides, the narrators' accounts often contradict each other or are incomplete" (115). Each new chapter in the novel, though it seems to represent an independent episode, it invites the previously accumulated narrative sediment, which completes the events and unites the characters within a network of family and tribal destinies.

Vlaicu (2011) took it from a different angle. He claimed that Western literary conventions of autobiography is adopted by Erdrich to be identifiable by the readership in the West since she identifies herself as Native American (75). Most of the chapters in *Love Medicine* are narrated by different characters, what Vlaicu called "autobiographers", but some other chapters are narrated by a third-person point of view. The technique of poly-voiced narration is a merger of postmodern style and Indian traditions of narration (75). It is one story which has been narrated from multiple perspectives. Vlaicu assumes that in spite of the inconsistencies, the chapters rest steady with the norm of performance in the society. The dates in the novel are arranged in a round way which indicates the notion of the cycle of life which is a feature of the Indian verbal practice (75).

#### **2.4.Postcolonial Perspective**

Although not apparent, Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, as many Native American literary works, it carries postcolonial elements. To what extent is this applicable? Kateryna Chornokur in her article: **"Postcolonial Religion and Motherhood in the Novels by Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker"** justified her postcolonial approach to Native American literature alongside with African American literature by referring to the major concepts of postcolonialism discussed in **"The Empire Writes Back"** i.e., opposition, the displacement of colonized persons, and the nature of postcolonial writing. The center-periphery correlation is intimately related to language problem (3). In several occasions, she comments when colonized people are compelled to print their literature in the language of an invader, they convert the language to expose the idiosyncrasies of their location and values (3).

In this respect, Native Americans have to tolerate the instruments of social colonization, which comprised defeat of innate tongues, obligatory transformation to Christianity, and obligation of the Western education" (4). As a logical result, several changes and effective

distortions to the traditional heritage of culture were introduced to their community and, thus, “evoked a number of strategies of resistance to the colonizing power” (4).

One of the strongest tools to hybridize other groups is religion. Christianity has been used by the Whites to domesticate aboriginal people and exterminate their culture. The honorable objective of teaching and improving the conditions of Native people and slaves, evangelists, as a canon, trailed wider social and political aims (19). Though Native Americans embraced Christianity, they felt the discriminatory practices of Christian churches as them to completely leave their own religion to be Christians (23). In this sense, Ines Talamantez traced the reaction of native women to such discrimination: Some native women resist completely all practices of Christianity and stick to their own culture, which gorgeously mix values and mysticism in one thorough view. Others track their traditional behaviors and have originated a technique which permits them to be Indians from particular beliefs, nevertheless, they hold Christian doctrine. Certainly some women embrace Christianity absolutely and opt for integration into the prevailing American principles. (Cited in Chornokur 23 ).

### **3. Conclusion**

With its novel and challenging postmodern techniques, *Love Medicine* has occupied a high position and distinguished place in the hearts of the American readers. It deserved to be one of the most popular contemporary Native American texts. Louise Erdrich innovates a unique style in her masterpiece *Love Medicine* in which she makes an amalgamation of the contemporary post modernity and the oral traditions of her ethnic group to send a message to the readership in the West, and may be the world, that the Native Americans are able to defend their identity and at the same time be part of the modern and civilized American culture.

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