



The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies

JASSS

International Journal of Social Science

Doi number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9761/JASSS2327>

Number: 26 , p. 497-505, Summer II 2014

LOUISE ERDRICH'S CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT THE ARRIVAL OF THE WHITE MAN

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Özet

Louise Erdrich Alman-Amerikan ve Chippewa mirasının çağdaş bir yazarıdır. Erdrich, kendisi gibi çift kültürlü geçmişe sahip insanların hayatlarını etkileyen bilinç ve uyanışı yansıtır. O, Beyaz Adam'ın gelişiyile, atalarının karşılaştığı problemlerin farkında ve bu farkındalığı eserlerinde başarıyla konu edinmiştir. Beyazların gelişi, Kızılderililer için, yerlilerin tüm değerlerini değiştiren yeni bir kaderin başlangıcı olmuştur. Bu iki ırkın karşılaşması, daha fazla altın ve ucuz iş gücü edinmek için beyazların eliyle yapılan birçok ölüm, acı ve zalimliklere neden olmuştur. Bu yüzden bu iki millet arasındaki etkileşim Louise Erdrich eserlerinde ortak temalardan biri olmuştur çünkü beyazlarla ve yerlilerin buluşması Kızılderililerin anılarında uğursuz bir tarih olarak kalmıştır.

Erdrich, karakterlerinin yardımıyla, eserlerinde trajedilerinden olumlu ve olumsuz sonuçlarını gösteren yetenekli bir yazardır. Bu yetenek yazarın tarihi objektif olarak işlemesine yardımcı olmuştur. Misyonerler tarafından yapılan kalıcı ve yıkıcı eylemleri tasvir ederken önyargısız kalmayı başarmıştır.

Özetle, Alman-Amerikan ve Chippewa kökenli popüler çağdaş yazarlarından biri olan Erdrich, Kızılderili tarihi hakkındaki bilincini eserlerinde anlatıyor ve bu bilinci karakterlerine yansıtmakta çok başarılı. Bu yazıda, Erdrich'in Kızılderili tarih bilinci ve bu bilincin karakterler vasıtasıyla nasıl işlendiği incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erdrich, Louise Erdrich, Bilinç, Uyanış, Beyazlar, Beyaz Adam

Abstract

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary writer of German-American and Chippewa heritage. She reflects consciousness and awakening marking lives of people, much like herself, from dual cultural backgrounds. Erdrich is aware of the problems that her ancestors have faced due to the arrival of white settlers and she is successful to illustrate such events in her works. The arrival of whites is the beginning of a new fate for Indians which changes the whole value of Native Americans. The meeting of two races causes a lot of deaths, sorrows and cruelties which are done by the hands of whites in order to find cheap labors and more gold. That's why, the interaction of different ethnicities is

one of the common themes in Erdrich's novels since the contact between the white man and Native American remains as an ominous date in the memories of the Indians.

Erdrich is a talented writer who is good at demonstrating negative and positive results of tragedies in her works by the help of characters. This talent lets Erdrich write the history objectively. She achieves remaining unprejudiced while depicting the permanent and destructive acts made by missionaries.

To sum up, Erdrich, one of the popular contemporary writers of German-American and Chippewa descent recounts her consciousness of the Native American history and she is very successful to reflect these consciousness on her characters. In this paper, Erdrich's consciousness of the Native American history and how it is depicted through characters will be studied.

Key Words: Erdrich, Louise Erdrich, Consciousness, Awakening, Whites, White Man

According to the *dictionary.reference.com* "consciousness" is "the state of being conscious; awareness of one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings, etc". When the issue is Louise Erdrich, the term "consciousness" implies, as Eileen Quinlan states, "Erdrich reflects on what has been lost and what endures from the disrupted histories of her Ojibwe ancestors "decimated by disease, fighting Plains Indian tribes to the west and squeezed by European settlers to the east."" (257). It also implies having enough knowledge about Native American origin as well as her German-French side and transferring the knowledge of Indian holocaust to the readers with its destructive results without being political and also not being prejudiced while digging history. In this sense, Erdrich never questions and delineates Indian background as a historian. Instead, she provides "a pathway leading readers to a more complete understanding of Native history, ideas and rights". Therefore, she helps "readers look backward to interpret not only the past, but also the present" (Coulombe 19). "Erdrich places an examination of issues of identity—namely those of gender, race, and sexuality—at the forefront of her project as a writer" (Iovannone 38). That's why; her dandy narration is welcomed by the majority. She neither garbles genocide of the Indians nor commentates about the misfortunate destiny of Native Americans. The aim is to enlighten the change has happened in Indian inhabitants after arrival of the white man. Therefore, the fatal effects of Native American holocaust are worked up by Erdrich as it has happened.

Despite the catastrophic force of the European colonists, Erdrich does not attitudinize a preconceived manner. On the contrary, the life of Indians is depicted realistically not only by the writer herself but by the characters since "in their identities Erdrich explores her own identity" (Quinlan 258). Thus, her writings are not the subject of a struggle between native warriors and European military forces. Instead, in order to reflect the real life,

Erdrich brings many non-Native characters into the novels as neighbors, government employees, friends, lovers and spouses. The Ojibwe characters' identities shift when they intermarry with people of German, French or Yankee ancestry. Some of Erdrich's pure-blood Ojibwe characters are noble heroes, while others are marginalized, even feared. The strongest and most admirable of her characters tend to be mixed-race individuals or those seeking to discover their backgrounds; their names reflect conscious choices of identities and behaviors focused on healing their communities. (Quinlan 260)

Throughout her novels, Erdrich explores American Indian themes through the characters that represent her mixed-blood culture and identity. In this sense, Douglas Andrew Barnim says that "Erdrich's characters never possess static identities nor are they ever defined by a singular culture or tradition. Instead, they oscillate between cultural extremes" (54). Although she is a "daughter of French Ojibwe mother and German American father" (McNally and Dalal), Erdrich is aware of where she belongs to and what has happened her Indian ancestors. In the light of this awareness, she shares the unfortunate background of Native Indians with her readers. Telling her people's stories puts her forward as an objective writer rather than being thought as a historian or a prejudiced writer. Instead of responding political questions, telling stories takes places so that she interferes with politic debates but remains with her objective narrating. In this respect, her storytelling is the answer of why she chooses silence instead of giving answer. As Kenneth M. Roemer says:

Louise Erdrich claims that she is driven by a question of survival: Why, after centuries of genocide, has she been one of the Indians "picked" to survive? Obviously, she can never answer the question, but that question drives her with a sense of commitment to tell and retell her people's stories. (332)

In the book called *Conversation with Louise Erdrich & Michael Dorris*, Erdrich is asked whether she considers herself as a Native writer and what she thinks of such labels. The answer explains why most of her characters are hybrids. She, thereof, never wants to label her characters. She adds "...I really don't like labels. While it is certainly true that a good part of my background, ..., and a lot of themes are Native American, I prefer to simply be a writer" (Wong 31, web). In this sense, using many mix-blood characters in her writings becomes meaningful. She also "opens the door to the exploration of another of her ethnic identities, her German one" (Embry 205). In other words, as Marcus Embry claims, "Erdrich's novel about Germans pulled her out of her Native American context" (205). Also her French heritage is a common theme in her novels. From this perspective, most of characters in her writings are mix-bloods who "indicate a persistent struggle to preserve the communal good by caring for future generation" (Schultz).

Although some critics claim that "Erdrich's novels are not unaware of political and social pressures" (Chapman, 165), unlikely

Erdrich is aware that politics permeates every aspect of life, but as she states, she does not want her writing to be known as disputatious. Rather, she allows the characters to present differing viewpoints, and the reader has the responsibility for assessing the value of the political views expressed in the writing. (Hollrah 84)

In other words, as Lydia A. Schultz claims, "in her novels, Erdrich wants readers to see just how much the politics of being marginalized is integrated into her characters' lives".

As a matter of fact, she is not a politic writer. In the light of colonization, American Indian indigenous worldview can make a political impression on her characters' activities. Nevertheless, the aim is to underline the situation in which Indian inhabitants have suffered from the dominant white power. *The Birchbark House*, *The Game of Silence* and *The Porcupine Year* exhibit the wars among nations and clans. Not only is the struggle with colonists but with one of the native clans, the Bwaanag.

There is always good fishing on this lake. But I think we are camped close to the big path of our enemies, the Bwaanag. If their warriors come across us on their way back to their homes, after a raid—mad that they got nothing, howah!—we'd be in big trouble. (Porcupine Year 43)

In this respect, in her novels Indian characters confront difficulties in holding onto their lands. They leave the reservation in order to grasp better opportunities but unfortunately seeking for new opportunities end in despair. They are also in dilemma whether devoting themselves to their indigenous cultures or adopting them with Europeans culture.

When Louise Erdrich is driven by a question of reservation, the answer she confesses is the explanation of whether she writes politically or not. Here is the question of the interviewer and the answer given by Erdrich without any intervention and comment:

Editors: To what extent do you see your portrayal of reservation life as a reflection of the white culture's destruction or preservation of Native American culture? Do you see your depiction as metaphorical or analogous to this larger cultural issue?

Erdrich: That's a great question, and I wish that I could see that. I feel that is the province of people who come and study the work. I don't see it while I'm working on it, just the way I don't see where the mesh is between traditional religion or Catholicism. I'm just telling the story, and the story is what moves me forward with the work, the narrative, and I want to get into the narrative. I want to tell a story to somebody, but I don't really know how I'm fitting into a political perspective. The thing I do believe is that I can't start out with a perspective and try to persuade or convince anybody of some particular end I have in mind. If I do that, I'll just have a bunch of politics in the story. What I'm really interested in is the human story, the human part of the narrative, the relationships, the love, the destruction, the honor, the pity; whatever is in those stories, I'm interested in coming close to the heart of that. (Conversations With Louise Erdrich 116)

Although it is not a history book, "Erdrich's writing is based in the historical and cultural contexts of the Ojibwe" (Hollrah 85). That's why, the date is very important in her writings. There are two familiar methods she uses for emphasizing the date. The first one is indicating date directly: some of her works, such as *Love Medicine*, *Shadow Tag* and *Tales of Burning Love*, chapters open with a specific date. This method is not chosen randomly but

consciously. The date enlightens the socio-economic and politic situations of Native American inhabitants in the white society. Representing the date indirectly is the other kind of using date: the books such as *The Birchbark House*, *The Game of Silence* and *The Porcupine Year* are appropriate examples for understanding the importance of writer's use of date. By depicting the death of Ten Snows and baby Neewo, which devastates Omakayas, the main character of *The Birchbark House*, *The Game of Silence* and *The Porcupine Year*, Erdrich informs readers that after American Revolution, "a smallpox epidemic ravaged the western frontier of the united States. The epidemic killed millions of Indians" (Leahy and Wilson xlix-1). Also Father Baraga and his mission school refer to the time of the Allotment Act.

Erdrich's consciousness allows her to write novels in a realistic way. By stating realism, not only is the aim to introduce Erdrich as a *realist writer* but accentuates that she is a writer who clarifies the terrible results of the Indian genocide on characters without judging. Laura M. Furlan claims that "Erdrich uses the first episode in the novel, the massacre and subsequent events, to convey movement. She creates a "contact zone" between the Ojibwas and the U.S. cavalry, and the Ojibwas are on the losing end" (60). Taking this into consideration, the calamitous effects of holocaust are handled carefully and, as a result of the contact between the natives and white man, the characters' changing under colonial domination can be observed tragically:

Euro-American contact led to the near-absolute decimation of indigenous populations, a disastrous alteration of culture and a permanent change to their physical world. For most individual Natives, this change came in the form of death; for others, disease; and for those who survived, the imposition of a foreign culture, will and identity. (Rensink 1)

Erdrich's realistic narration can be detected while checking her narrating style. A single culture or tradition is not focused in her works; instead "the culture that Erdrich writes from and about is the subject of not one but two cultural codes or reality models" (Dennis 176). In this sense, her novels do not address only Native Americans, on the contrary, as John Lloyd Purdy mentions, "her writings continue to garner influential critical attention while also reaching a broad, multicultural audience" (405).

The sense of consciousness is so deep in her works that no nation is superior to other nation, no culture is superior to other culture and no religion is superior to other religion. As one critic notes, Erdrich succeeds to write her Chippewan experiences by combining her European and Native American side. Meanwhile, more than one origin, tradition or belief becomes subject. The whole characters argue their thought no matter whether it is logical or not. In contrast to many writers, Erdrich uses more than one narrator that is totally opposite each other. In order to create the awareness of tolerance of Indian society, in addition to the use of more cultures and origins, the use of more narrators symbolizes neutrality that even how two natives are varied in responding to European American civilization. In this sense, Helen Dennis contributes that:

Tracks solves the problem of narration by using two, homodiegetic narrators: Nanapush and Pauline Puyat. They represent two polar opposites in terms of Native American

responses to European American civilization and, arguably, colonization. Nanapush is a traditionalist. Pauline Puyat is a mixed-blood who denies her Indian blood in order to be accepted into the convent (138). Nanapush is an avatar of the Ojibwe trickster figure, Nanabozho (33); Pauline aspires to Catholic sainthood. Nanapush tells his story to a named addressee, Lulu, and for a specific reason: to dissuade her from marrying a Morrissey. His style suggests that his is an oral narrative, whereas Pauline's narrative style is more writerly, and it is not clear who her narratee might be. (164)

Erdrich's reservation experience and mix-blood heritage becomes an important theme in her works. "Erdrich writes primarily about the multigenerational family she has created, which includes both Chippewas and Euro-Americans of German ancestry, reflecting her own ancestry" (Pierotti 145). Her raising as a Catholic also has a great influence on her characters. The places used by Erdrich are portrayed so attentively that the imagination of landscapes that she has created becomes

... as real to her readers as their own hometowns. For her, it's Argus, North Dakota, a town like the place where she grew up, on the endless Dakota plains. Like many of her characters she was raised Catholic and deeply influenced by a mix of cultures—her mother was French Ojibwe, her father, German-American, and both taught at a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. (Moyers)

The use of missionaries is inevitable in Erdrich's work. Despite military engagements, "force was not the only methods the United States used to confront Indians. Missionaries and other and other reform organizations believed it was their duty to 'civilize' the Indians" (Leahy and Wilson lii). The 'civilization' idea contained an annihilation of Indian tradition and attempted to undermine their values. Erdrich does not handle this issue as a historian; on the contrary, as usual she indites the happening results in a realistic mood. Through her works, the difference between her thought and writing appears clearly. If she reverberates her opinion about missionaries and their fatal acts on characters, she would come forward as a historian identity which is far away from her writer identity. There have been always varied characters who argue about religion, culture on both sides. These debates clarify readers about the message: No culture or religion is totally good or bad; all have advantages and disadvantages. Unlike her depicting missionaries, since she never draws a sharp line in her works, in an interview with Katie Bacon, Erdrich claims that

Missionary work is essentially tragic. Those who enter the field from the religious side often do so out of love, and out of love they destroy the essence of the people they love. Of course, there are many sorts of priests and nuns—those who despise their converts included. My grandfather believed in the power

of the traditional Ojibwe religion, and he also attended Catholic Mass. The priests where he lived (Turtle Mountain) were at the time amenable to a syncretic belief system. There is no tension in my own life regarding the two—I accept the Catholicism of many in my family. Ojibwe traditional practices are more meaningful to me, but I am not deeply religious anyway. That is to say, I do not have an assured faith. I am full of doubt. But even those who doubt can practice a faith, and can pray, and can try to act out of a tradition of kindness and love. My own emphasis is on how religion helps in this world and not how it might improve our standing in the next. (Bacon)

While talking to Katei Bacon about religion, by stressing her “own emphasis is on how religion helps in this world and not how it might improve our standing in the next” can be generalized on any field she deals with. She especially insists on how the happened events affect society not why happened or what the happening cases might enthrall the community. In this sense, leading characters is not preferable in Erdrich work.

While narrating her Indian background, Erdrich’ consciousness is worth seeing. Neither are all Indians perfect nor are the whole white people demons. Her writings have three types of characters: full blood natives, mix-blood natives and whites. When she stories the kidnapping event of the white children, she consciously emphasizes that all kinds of those origins in cooperation of kidnapping. By doing so, she underlines the importance of kidnapping not race:

“Help, help!” it was Zahn, yelling from the canoe as he tried to fight off the men, who had sneaked around along the shore. Omakayas turned to see them—four raged Anishinabed and mixed bloods and one white man. They had leaped into the canoes and were trying to shove off.” (Porcupine Year 97)

What drags Erdrich to constitute such a cautionary sample? Why is the collaboration of habitants, mix-blood and whites presented? The answer comes from Omakayas’ mother: “Don’t go near the humans, either the Anishinabeg or the chimookomanug. Stay deep in the woods. Hide if you hear Old Tallow’s dogs” (Birchbark House 189). Human should not be judged according to their origins. Instead, one should be adjudged for his/her acts. Also, the barking of Old Tallow’s dogs symbolizes danger and warns about foreigners. Via Old Tallow’s dogs’ barking, readers’ attention is directed to the coming threat. The threat is important, not where it comes from. In this wise, if one is cruel, no matter what origin s/he is, the cruelty should be told. Such kind of narrating does not mean that Erdrich agrees with the destructive act of the white man. On the contrary, by the help of reflecting some bad acts of Native inhabitants or some good behaviors of the Europeans, Erdrich succeeds monitoring the history as it should be. Likely, she handles the interaction between the whites and natives as a writer, not like a historian.

The result of the interaction of different ethnicities is one of the common themes in Erdrich’s novels since the contact between the white man and Native American remains as an ominous date in the memories of the Indians. Erdrich is a talented writer who is good at

demonstrating negative and positive results of such problems in her works. After the first contact, the white settlers flood in the Native America. An exaggerated pressure is come into force by the white man. That's why; inhabitants are torn up in order to find any refuges. Todd Leahy and Raymond Wilson state that:

During a time of intense pressure, Indians sought any refuge. Some turned to religious movements, others attempted to accommodate their new neighbors, and others still armed themselves for further military confrontations. As the 19th century dawned, Indians attempted to negotiate another new world. Gone were the colonial powers that could be played against one another. Indian people were left to deal with one power, a power that held as its national mission the perpetual expansion of its people. (lii)

Another reason why Erdrich chooses the kidnappers from different and/or mix-heritage people shows that "the impact of Europeans on the Chippewa people and vice versa" (Pierotti 146). Whereas the colonists believe that they and their religion are superior to the Native Americans and their *savage* religions, Richard W. Pointer adds that "many Euro-Americans had occasion to become familiar with Indian medical cures and healing practices. Some settlers borrowed freely from native remedies, especially in moments when their confidence in their own physicians or medical techniques had ebbed" (7).

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