Family, Love And Culture In Love Medicine

Love Medicine is a native American novel written by Louise Erdrich. This fiction novel is a tale of the many Chippewa Indians and their struggles living in society. Erdrich helps to construct a picture of what life could have been like to these native Americans. Love Medicine is a great novel that illustrates how someone's life can drastically change when they have pushed away from things so comforting to them, but love, culture and family are always there when they wander astray.

The Chippewa Indians lived in the mid-west. The government started taking away their rights and rituals. The government was very unfair to the Chippewa's'. Bo writes "First and foremost lies in the unfair policies made by the white government like the Indian Removal Act and the Allotment Policy. The government intends to turn Indians into farmers and launch its so-called advanced civilization on these Indians." A treaty was created by the government that pushed them off the land they had known and loved and even made them send their children to private government schools. These changes the government forced on them required the native Americans to learn English and even the American culture. Since this treaty the native Americans have become more acceptable to the way of American living and are now looked at to be more American and less like native Americans who were actually in America first. This has caused many of the cultural traditions to disintegrate, given them opportunities to be lost. Love Medicine gives readers the ability to view the government's actions throughout the story. Many characters mention how it has took away their background, their history and who they are as people.

Louise Erdrich, she goes by her first name Karen, was born in Little Falls, Minnesota. Growing up she spent most of her time in North Dakota on a Chippewa reservation called Turtle Mountain. Her grandparents lived on the reservation, and her parents were teachers for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Many of her characters are modeled after her family members, she says that her family helped with her creativity as a writer. Erdrich graduated from Dartmouth but while attending the college she published many of the works in the magazines at the university. After gaining her master's degree from John Hopkins University she became an editor for the Boston Indian Council Newspaper. Throughout her writing career she has published many fantastic novels and many of them even have the same similar themes. She is known for her books about Native American Culture with many interesting aspects. Erdich is able to give a novel many elements, she even does so in Love Medicine, "Critics of Love Medicine confront the book's thematic elements, narrative strategies, and structural readings of Chippewa." ("Erdrich,Louise") Love Medicine was Erdrich's first best-selling novel.

Love Medicine is a novel that combines different characters' stories to create an intriguing book for readers to engage in. The novel starts in the 80's where readers are introduced to June Kashpaw, right before she dies. It then hops to June's niece, Albertine, who is learning about her aunts' death. Albertine then decides to go and visit her family on the reservation. "Nothing?" said Mama piercingly, "Nothing to come home to?" She gave me a short glance full of meaning. I had after all, come home, even husbandless, childless, driving a fall apart car" (Erdrich,13). This gives the reader insight into Albertine who like many others her age had tried to leave the reservation for an education and a better life or a more typical American life. Erdrich

then introduces us to many characters, who are Albertine's family. She gives a back story for each person she comes into contact with. Throughout the story readers are shown the many struggles of the characters, leading to the pathway of finding their selves as an individual. Erdrich enriches the novel with love stories, abusive relationships in the family and religion. The characters are described as very complicated and full of life, but the one constant between all characters is that they do not have a relationship with their birth parents and have been taken in by others in the community. Because of the bond with the community these characters are unable to break the bond with the reservation as Erdrich describes through Albertine. Albertine has been on her own, living a good life off the reservation until hearing of her Aunts death which leads her right back to the reservation. Aunt June was Albertine's mentor and closest relative, and because of this she needs to return home to cope with the loss of her aunt. Through each chapter we are able to follow characters through many moments of their lives and find out that no matter what is happening they always use experiences from the home and the reservation to cope with the issues.

Erdrich was able to create a diverse way to show readers how a character's personality can be defined through many trials and not just formed around their culture's status in society. Erdrich describes how life is like for Native Americans through many different stories, not just by showing the rituals or struggles of a group as a whole but as an individual. She is able to draw the readers out of their original beliefs and open their eyes to new points of view by using techniques that we have no previously seen in historical novels. Barry and Prescott state, "In Love Medicine, Erdrich forces readers to peer into the breach that separates two ways of viewing the world and human experience. Her native American characters may not appear to carry any weight even for sympathetic, astute readers unfamiliar with the possibilities that native American culture allows, for such readers may be trapped in the white culture's mythology of the Indian so romantically dramatized in Plunge of the Brave." This quote supports the theory that throughout the book Erdrich is continually allowing for the Indian culture to grow and allowing the readers to be more enriched with the ways that they portray the rituals of the culture.

Native Americans were known as people of the land, but the government took that from them without allowing any input from them. Love Medicine shows us just how important land is to the Native Americans. In Erdrich's stories of Lulu we are shown her hatred toward the American government when it came to land, She states "If we're going to measure land, let's measure right. Every foot and inch you're standing on, even if it's top of the highest skyscraper, belongs to the Indians. That's the real truth of the matter." (Erdrich 278) Because the land is seen as a connection between the tribes and their familes they hold great value and meaning to owning the land. When the American government passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830 it forced them out of their fertile land in the east and into the west. This was really wearisome for them because it was more than a place to live on, to build a home and to find food. Ecological studies have shown that landscapes and people's identity are closely related. Erdrich does a great job at showing the readers just how sad the Native Americans were when they talk about the hometown/land they were forced to leave. The natives find that the whites are full of lies and even Lulu believes that she is learning the lies in a government private school she was sent to, "She finds the language of the white disgusting. She finds the language of the white is full of hypocrisy and lies. And only when she is standing on the land of reservation can she find a sense of belonging." (Zhang) Lulu's statement confirms how the natives felt about being ripped from their homeland that they dearly loved, respected and provided for their tribes and families with. Love Medicine even mentions the government's census through Lulu's belief that the

government only wants to know how many of them there are so they can get rid of them. She believes that the representation of them on paper was just a kill list. Native Americans saw the government as a threat to their culture, after living so long without any disturbance they now had people who they had never seen before ordering them what to do and when to do it, with no respect for the culture of individuals in which they were speaking.

Many white traders and Europeans who founded the “new world” believed the Native American woman to be whores, slaves and so low that they were no account and did not have a place in the “new world”. Many women who started writing novels in the 1980s and 90s wanted to prove this to be wrong. Theda Perdue was one. “She points out that the European and Anglo-American men who kept records about Cherokee women's lives had no real access into what not only a foreign culture, but also would have been a separate women's sphere within that culture.” (Miles) Due to these reports from the Europeans, Native Americans were looked down upon even before anyone knew about their culture or their way of life. Purdue is sure to mention within her novel all the ways the Europeans were wrong, she even states that they taught the Natives that sexism is a common thing and it is okay to be sexist toward the other gender. She goes on to describe that the Cherokees always sought balance in life, even when it came to men and women, they looked for harmony. In Love Medicine abuse is shown many times in the relationships between husband and wife. King and Lynette were married and in an abusive relationship where King would brutally beat his wife. On page 16, Erdrich writes “Lynette’s face, stained and swollen, bloomed over the wheel. She was a dirty blond, with little patches of hair that were bleached and torn. This shows how the natives strayed away from their culture of harmony and started using more violence like the Europeans did with them.

During the time of the 1960s and 1970s many novels by native American writers were being published. A lot of social and political activism was going for many people who were Native American. A lot of the novels include the same themes that are associated with poverty, alcoholism education and jobs. Many were also being relocated, so authors would create conflict through the concerns of the land like Natives being connected to it and it being related to their life. Struggles for Native Americans were being published everywhere through fiction and non-fiction novels. Many fiction novels however do not focus on socioeconomic problems, but there are still familiar aspects. “In the typical native American plots of the novels of the previous decades, a protagonist is involved in a struggle to find identity and fulfillment, and the process of loss and recovery constitutes the story line.” (Flavin, 58) In Love Medicine, the loss of Aunt June brings Albertine back to the reservation where her family is located. On the reservation and as the backgrounds of the characters are being told is where the readers find conflict. The characters are taken on journeys to find themselves. This leads to recovery for the natives, they are able to find themselves and be proud of where they came from.

Not only is being from a native American background a struggle in society, there are also many hardships that come with it. Whether it be discrimination in any workplace or job opportunity, financial struggles or even a problem between social status, although these hardships seem to build on the characters it is also what helps to make them who they are. Erdrich not only builds the story through hard times but also through the good ones. Family and finding oneself as an individual also help these characters grow throughout the story. “Her strategy is not to assert her Indian identity but rather to deny it as she works to improve her status.” (Dyck 28). This quote shows how hard it was for Indian women to be found reliable in a certain job, in order to even move in the job force, the women would start to deny their cultural background. Denial of culture is shown through Marie in Love Medicine. Lipsha talks about how Marie will not admit

that she has any relation to the native Americans. Lipsha states “Although she will not admit she has a scrap of Indian blood in her, there's no doubt in my mind she's got some Chippewa.” (Erdrich 236) This quote shows how many of the Natives felt. They did not want to admit that they were native Americans, in fear that they would be looked down upon.

Therefore, Love Medicine is a book of individuality and the struggles throughout the years of being native American. The novel brings a great overview of the culture and how natives went through rough patches and being ripped from what they’ve always known to finding themselves through their own hardships. Family, love and individuality make up the realms of Lousie Erdrich’s novel. This is an excellent novel for any reader looking for insight on a native American culture.

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