

Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* - A Study Using Bakhtin's Dialogism

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Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to advance the theoretical aspect of Bakhtin's Dialogism in the Native American literature with special reference to the novel *The Plague of Doves*. By closely examining the text, the study finds the presence of the dialogical elements in the novel. Additionally, it examines the character voices that are blending together to generate dialogic forms. Instead of showcasing their own strength, the voices allowed other voices to emerge and take on unique qualities while they persisted until the conclusion of the narrative.*

Keywords: Dialogism, Polyphony, Ojibwe, Mixed Blood

Louise Karen Erdrich is one of the most accomplished Native American writers. Her novels reflect strongly her origin, and family and community background. The narratives in Erdrich's books imply that people are a part of a web of stories about their identities, families, communities, societies, cultures, and humankind. Despite the fact that Erdrich is mostly recognized as a successful modern Native American writer, her Turtle Mountain Chippewa and European American ancestry are revealed in her meticulously edited writing. The novel is a representational and fictional slice of American history, and the title symbolizes the disease of the invasion of white settlers on innocent Native Americans in America. In this novel she highlights the prejudice, lynching, and harsh living conditions that Native Americans endure in comparison to White people.

Louise Erdrich entered the literary world with the publication of *Love Medicine* (1984). It received many awards and she therefore immediately became the most popular contemporary Native American novelist among the indigenous and the non-indigenous writers. Her pictorial descriptions of the fictional reservation set a template for the writers of the 1990s. Erdrich always takes efforts to distinguish her works from other Native novelists. The outstanding feature of her novels is interlocking stories of the communal life and the tribal history.

The Beet Queen (1986), written by Erdrich after *Love Medicine*, used the same setting and storytelling style. Erdrich concentrates on various facets of characters and locations in each of these books. *The Crown of Columbus*, Erdrich's collaborative novel, was released in 1991. She also authored *The Antelope Wife*, a magic realism book. Her German ancestry served as the basis. Similar to *The Love Medicines*, Erdrich uses postmodernist methods in this work to examine her German ancestry.

Another exceptional poet is Louise Erdrich. She addresses the same themes in her poetry as in her fiction. The book covers descriptions of motherhood, women's standing and role in society, and fertility alongside religious themes through myth and history. After a number of years writing children's novels, Erdrich returned to writing adult fiction in 2008 with the release of *The Plague of Dove* (2008), *The Round House* (2012), and *LaRose* (2016), which together form the Justice trilogy. Her dystopian future novel *The Future Home of the Living God* described a society in which childbearing was illegal when a kid showed evidence of reverse development.

The Ojibwe culture and customs were also depicted in the book. It was also compared to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Night Watchman* (2020) and *The Sentence* (2021), Erdrich's most recent books, gave the impression that they, too, had tapped into fresh inspiration and created inventive narrative formats. The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for 2021 will go to *The Night Watchman*, a book about the fight to prevent the 1950s uprooting and eradication of numerous Native American tribes. In the book *The Sentence*, a family faces difficult circumstances while a virus and a ghost loom large.

The Author's Style

The notable characteristic of her works is setting. Her characters are similar to characters of William Faulkner's work. Her writing is narrative in nature, subtly referencing Native American oral traditions. Her work demonstrates how skillfully she incorporates historical accounts into her writing. She wants to record historical narratives in the oral tradition in order to preserve Native American culture.

She does employ multiple characters to expose different perspectives of the story. These methods are all somewhat reminiscent of cultural customs. Broken narrative, evocative language, and a vague usage of magic are characteristics of her writing. The intricate and multifaceted aspects of twentieth-century living arrangements are what they are worried about.

The Chosen Novel for Study

"What is the difference between the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon a man?

In both cases, justice is prey to unknown dreams." - (Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*)

The title of the novel, which depicts American history, makes reference to the plague that European settlers inflicted on America's defenseless Native Americans. It also implies that the doves actually do appear to be a plague that is starving the populace and systematically destroying their homes. The book was named an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award winner and made it to the Pulitzer Prize finals. In this novel, Erdrich discusses how indigenous people are subjected to prejudice, including lynching, racism, and worse living conditions than white people, and it also throws light on the discrimination done to natives, for instance, lynching, racism, and miserable living conditions as compared to whites. The story is set between 1916 and 1960 in North Dakota, around a white colony called Pluto. It provides a variant overview of the reservation lives of Indians and white settlers. The novel is told using Erdrich's famous multiple narrative techniques through four different characters points of view. The story shifts from the past to the present, and the flashbacks convey the memory play of the characters.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the cruel murder of five members of the Lochrens family, a white family who were mercilessly slaughtered, and only an infant survives the onslaught. At that time, a group of Indians were travelling and were unfortunately found near the scene of the crime. The town's people caught four of them, whom they lynched, but one managed to escape the site. The pain of those times of lynching came from the mouth of the one who survived. This lynching complicated the relationship between whites and Native Americans. Four distinct narrators, each with a different connection to the terrible past of the town, tell the story.

One of the narrators, Evelina Harp, attempts to parse the connections upon first hearing about the story of the lynching. The second narrator, the Judge, starts off by telling the tale of how the town of Pluto was founded on land that was forcibly taken from an Indian reservation. Later on in his story, he and Evelina's aunt fall in love, eventually becoming husband and wife. The third narrator, Marn Wolde's story, appears disconnected for a while. She runs off from home with a preacher, Billy Peace, and they build up a following elsewhere. But eventually they are back in Pluto, and Billy establishes his congregation on her family land. The fourth and final narrator is Dr. Cordelia Lochren, who, it turns out, is the baby who survived the massacre. All four narrators attempt to expose the history that is veiled in multiple layers of prejudice. They twine together the shattered fragments of history. By using these narrators, Erdrich demonstrates the irony of Native Americans being strangled and how, with the introduction of whites, Native Americans' religion and culture become victims of the imaginings of the invading race.

Bakhtin's Dialogism

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, is widely regarded as one of the twentieth century's most influential fictional thinkers. The works of Mikhail Bakhtin, including *Rabelais and His World* (1965), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929, 1963), and *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), provide a view of his ideas. Some of the major concepts put forth by Bakhtin are dialogue, heteroglossia, polyphony, carnival / carnivalesque, genre, centripetal/centrifugal forces, authorship etc.

According to David Shepherd, "[t]he term "dialogism" is most commonly used to denote the quality of an instance of discourse that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates. The positive connotations of dialogism are often reinforced by a contrast with "monologism," denoting the refusal of discourse to acknowledge its relational constitution and its misrecognition of itself as independent and unquestionably authoritative" (Dialogism / the Living Handbook of Narratology). The concept of dialogue is his most important idea, and the dialogic concept of languages fundamental as proposed by him. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist write: "the phenomenon that Bakhtin calls 'polyphony' is simply another name for dialogism" (Holquist 242).

In his essay "The Epic and the Novel" Bakhtin introduces a concept of the novel as a dialogic representation of reality. The basic property of any discourse Bakhtin locates in dialogic orientation. He perceives dialogism as pervading not only the internal dialogism of the word, but stretching beyond to cover the entire compositional structure of a discourse (Leitch 1091). Dialogism or Dialogics of Bakhtin's theory that suggests the continual dialogue of a work of literature with other works or authors is an extensive philosophy that considers that all communication is dialogic, where meaning can only be understood in its social context. Dialogue is more than just an argument or a conversation between characters or even authors; it is a unique style of communication.

Dialogical Elements in the Chosen Novel

This present paper aims at tracing the dialogical elements and analysing Louise Erdrich's most noteworthy work, *The Plague of Doves*. Erdrich has tried to make a connection between his texts

and various sources which has prompted her to create a complex and unique work of art. Her writing aims at being dialogic, by including dialogues between different experiences, white and Ojibwe, and between forms, the novel and oral storytelling. Dialogism is inherently ambiguous, complex, and unpredictable; these are important concepts in Erdrich's writing. Erdrich writes novel then transculturally transforms it for her own needs, giving it Native American themes and traits derived from oral traditions. As Fabienne Quennet states,

“Native Americans have a long tradition of oral literature, a literature whose whole existence resides in performance and similar to music.... [existing] in a tradition of performances of songs, story, beliefs, and traditional forms rather than to a presentation of a static text”(Quennet 31-32).

Moreover, it is mentioned that, in her work, every narrative that is told is unique and never ends the same. In the exact same way, her stories end abruptly. Erdrich is free to return to them whenever she wants, pick up the thread, and carry on the narrative. As Fabienne argues, “these are evidences of dialogue; they rely on the relationship between the teller and an audience, and the narrative is revised, told, and retold”. In her writing, some of her works are written as short stories and later revised to form novels. A few of her earlier works' reference can be found in this novel.

The novel establishes a dialogue with history as it exceeds from fiction to real life in narrating the acts of violence. The present study identifies the socio cultural and historical dimensions of dialogism in the novel. The characters in the book are those who lived in the fictitious town of Pluto, North Dakota, in the middle to late 20th century. The town's inhabitants are plagued by memories of a 1911 lynching in which a white mob killed three Native Americans, among them Holy Track, a thirteen-year-old boy. The white farming family known as the Lochrens was massacred, leaving just one baby alive, and the mob thought that Native Americans were responsible. This work of fiction is based on the Spicer Massacre, a real-life incident. The characters in the tale are still troubled by things that transpired in the past. Erdrich draws inspiration from the Spicer Massacre, but he modifies the facts to present the Native American perspective and critique the role of white people. This represents the ongoing effects of historical white brutality against Native Americans on contemporary indigenous civilizations. In order to drive away the common misconceptions about Native American violence held by Europeans, Erdrich retells the massacre and provides an alternate account of what actually occurred and the identity of the killer.

Dialogism suggests that a text or utterance has relationships, both apparent and implicit, to earlier, current, and maybe future texts. A text inspires a representation of the discourse, the textual resources relevant to the circumstance, and the way the current text places itself and refers to other texts through such relations and exchanges. This novel has a dialogic discourse based on historical events. Six members of a white farming family called the Spicers were savagely attacked and murdered in the state of North Dakota in 1897, “with the exception of two daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Spicer, who chanced to be away from home at the time” (Stevens P.2).

In this historic event, dialogical voices are evidenced as the perspectives of native and white people in America are reflected. Law enforcement launched an investigation to find the culprits after a farmer came across the incident. Although the identity of the person who killed the Spicer family remains a mystery, several people suspected Native Americans:

“It is believed that Indians may have been the murderers, although there is nothing to substantiate the theory other than that a number of them are said to have been seen loitering about the neighborhood. It is said they were decked with war paint, which is considered proof that they were out for mischief” (Stevens P.2).

Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and dialogism provide as a framework by which to explore how Erdrich makes her characters speak for themselves and express different points of view on

the world. Erdrich's novels are with one or more narrative consciousness. This novel is told using Erdrich's famous multiple narrative consciousnesses through four different characters points of view. By letting her characters express themselves in their own voices, Erdrich presents us with the different social and individual language of his time.

By close reading of the novel, dialogical discourses or multi-voices are found, like the perspective of white people and Native people, and spiritual dimensions like the Catholicism of invaders and the religion of natives. Evalina Harp, the first narrator of the novel, tries to connect lynching stories in the novel by knowing past stories from her grandfather, Mooshum, who worked to renew the faith of the younger generation. These stories are depicted as examples of the realities of the new religion and culture. On hearing the words of Father Cassidy, Mooshum states:

“It was an issue of rights... Getting their rights recognized, when they had already proved the land the Michifs and whites. And old pound maker. They wanted the government to do something. That's all. And the government pissed about this way” (PD 32-33).

Evalina Harp, on the other hand, assimilates her mixed blood and celebrates to highlight white privilege and the effects it has had on all generations, despite being ignorant of her family history. For instance, Evelina uses the following example when describing her prospective Métis grandmother someone with both Native American and white ancestry:

“She had the pale, opaque skin and slanting black eyes of the Metis or Michif women in whose honor the bishop of that diocese had written a warning to his priests, advising them to pray hard in the presence of half-breed women, and to remember that although their forms were inordinately fair their hearts were savage and permeable” (PD 11-12).

Judge Antone Bazil, the second narrator of the novel, tells the tale of how the town of Pluto was founded on land that was forcibly taken from an Indian reservation. In his perspectives of identity, it could be noted another voice. He adheres and follows native ways which is an inspiration for characters like Evelina who is not able to handle bi-cultural heritage. He is a mixed-blood like Evelina but he has no confusion regarding his identity. He truly values both aspects of his ancestry, as he states:

I am, the clichéd mixed-blood with a wolf by the ear. One of my advantages in holding on to the wolf is that I grew up dividing my time between my mother's family on the reservation, and the big house in Pluto. Thus, I know something about both the sides of many cases I hear. (PD 114)

Judge Bazil has an affair with a white lady, Dr. Cordelia Lochren. The fourth and final narrator is the baby who survived the massacre. After the romantic failure, he inherits an interest in law, but before that, he did not think much about his identity. He was astonished to know of Dr. Cordelia's hatred towards natives in the words of Geraldine as follows: “Oh that doctor who won't treat Indians” (PD 291). On the contrary, Dr. Cordelia heals her wound too by giving her medical treatment to Warren Wolde, who is a real murderer in her family. Dr. Cordelia reconciles herself at the end of the novel when she says, “I would like to declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family's murderer” (PD 311) after she became the president of Pluto.

Conclusion

This research article explores the dialogical discourse in the novel *The Plague of Doves*. Generally, Louise Erdrich uses her own Ojibwe folk stories, mythological allusions, and historical past events about the Native American tribes as sources for her writings. She also uses historical events and multi-narratives to explore different voices intertwined into dialogic forms in the novel. Taking into consideration the narrations of the novel, one should suppose that Erdrich held a

different view about her novels and characters and that the studied novels had all the ingredients of a polyphonic and accordingly dialogic novel that Bakhtin talks about.

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