

NEW APPROACH TO THE USE OF INDIAN CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S NOVELS

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Abstract

The presented article deals with the analysis of narrative techniques used in the novels of Native American writer Louise Erdrich. In writing her novels the writer makes an effective use of captivity narratives in presenting the history of Native Americans through her novel characters. By using captivity narratives that present good and bad Native Americans, Louise Erdrich changes the images of local Indians and presents her descendants as cultured and caring people who worry about the future of the tribes. Local Indian history, culture, traditions and rituals are introduced and reminded to modern generation of Native Americans through the novels of Louise Erdrich.

Keywords: Indian, culture, history, captivity narrative, dichotomy, American, novel, traditions..

Introduction

The arrival of the first settlers in the new American continent led to the development of a new literary genre, the Indian captivity narratives, in American literature. The first Indian captivity narratives belong to Mary Rowlandson and John Smith in which we develop our images of Native American Indians. Thus the first Indian captivity narratives became the source that helped to shape our understanding of Native American Indian identities. Mary Rowlandson's and John Smith's captivity narratives exemplify good samples of the Indian captivity narrative genre in which we see war-like features of Native American Indians. In their captivity narratives local people of the American continent are presented as savage people who constantly attack settlers who they regard enemies of their tribes. American literary critic Holly Messit notes that many settlers imagined "the Native Americans as the instruments of the devil living in the wilderness". In these captivity narratives Native Americans were presented as wild, uncultured people, who violently killed European settlers by using various strategies of attack. In her captivity narrative Mary Rowlandson described northeastern Nipmucs, Pocasset Indian tribes who attacked Lancaster, Massachusetts at the start of King Philip's War in 1675 "There were twelve killed, some shot, some sabb'd with their Spears, some knock'd down with their Hatchets...". These kinds of descriptions and portrayals of Native American Indians formed negative views and images of the local people not only in the minds of newly-arrived settlers but also European people who were interested in settling in the new continent. Positive

features of Native American Indians were first described in the captivity narratives written during the XVIII and XIX centuries. In these narratives readers could see noble Native American Indians who were supporting and providing assistance to settlers by teaching them survival skills and familiarizing them with their culture and wild nature.

The XX the century of American literature was enriched with the novels and stories of Native American writers, who focused on the cultural values, beliefs, lifestyle and bloody history of Native Americans with the goal of reminding, familiarizing young generation with their history. In this period, due to the publications and the positive reviews of novels about Native American Indians, there was developed field of Native American Literature that has given voice to the underrepresented perspectives from native Americans. In their novels, writers made an attempt to introduce their tribes by telling the stories, tales and myths that reflect and demonstrate the specific features that make the tribes different from other tribes in the American continent. Together with other Native American writers, Louise Erdrich's novels also introduce her Chippewa tribe by focusing on the widespread culture notion that they are the enemy of new settlers "who deprive new Americans of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

In her novels Louise Erdrich makes an effective use of personal accounts of her descendants who cover troubled moments in the life of Chippewa tribe by describing the loss of their land and captivity narratives of European settlers who present the images of Native Americans as war-like people. Through her characters, Louise Erdrich makes an attempt to explore and explain behavioral features of Native Americans who resist the settlers in order to keep their land. By describing their actions, the writer demonstrates Native Americans' intentions of keeping their land and preserving tribe, though they face strict reservation reforms they need to follow.

Louise Erdrich understands that land plays significant role in the life of Native American Indians and the most valuable part of Indian character identity. For the tribe people land forms the core of the tribal rituals. If the tribe loses the land, then their identity is lost. For the character Nector in the novel "Love Medicine" land plays vital role for him and he states "Comfort is not security and money in the hand disappears... only the land matters". "Tracks" character Nanapush is worried much about losing the tribal land and he realizes that if the tribe loses the land, they lose their future, their children: "We lose children in different ways. They turn their faces to the white towns or they become so full of what they see in the mirror, there is no reasoning with them anymore" (Tracks 170). According to critic Gloria Bird, "the sense of loss in the novels of Louise Erdrich is constantly present and it romanticizes the past". Gloria Bird gives example of Nanapush, important character in "Love Medicine", who did many things as the last person in the tribe to protect and keep the land and writes, "The connection between the romanticism of the past and the construct of the noble savage should be obvious; the people as childlike innocents are corrupted by civilization". Though the writer makes use of captivity narratives and personal accounts in creating the characteristics of her Indian heroes, she does not present them with features of wild, uncultured Indian or noble Native American. In her characters, Louise Erdrich does not present the dichotomy of the Native American behavior

and for this reasons her novels with the characters function culturally in which they are “neither wholly good nor wholly evil”. They are the people who witness and survive the hard tensions of US government reforms and bloody attempts to keep to the tribal traditions. At the same time, they understand that they will be “lost and misguided if their old traditions die”. This is illustrated in the character of Nanapus in “Love Medicine”, who leads his tribesmen and understands how it is possible to get Lulu back from the boarding school and maintain the tribal traditions.

In her essay Holly Messit states that “if the captivity narratives tell the story of one individual's survival, Erdrich's novels are about community survival, the survival of a heritage and a way of life.” In novel “Tracks” and “Love Medicine”, we can see how characters act, so that they survive as one community. In “Love Medicine” families lose their members no matter what their ages and positions are and this way old secrets of the tribe are lost. The novel begins with scenes in which we see characters in tears and all their belongings are torn. The writer describes June in her pink shell that is “ripped across the stomach” and Gordie with the face that is “creased and puckered from being stitched up after an accident”. In the novel members of the Kashpaws family are also described as people who suffer as the result of losing touch with their descendants. All generations of Kashpaws were the people who carried all the secrets of life and the arrival of new settlers made Kashpaws people “to change their tribal duty”. Novel characters King, Albertine and Nector are unable to perform their duties which leads the tribe to the loss of the memory.

For the authors of captivity narratives Smith, Rowlandson and Wakefield writing means going back to their communities, no matter what experiences they have had with Native American Indians in the new land. In their captivity narratives they describe the reality of what they have seen and what they have witnessed, though attempts to communicate with local people have not been successful. This in turn demonstrate that authors of the captivity narratives not only described Native Americans as violent and wild people, but also, people who could provide support and build a new life. Moreover, in their captivity narratives they also write about their spiritual journey as it was the way to their salvation. This gives captivity narratives the function of spiritual autobiography, in which the captive believes in God helping to survive the captivity. In her captivity narrative, Rowlandson describes the ways how “she uses the Bible to express her fear and anger as well as the way that religion helps her to identify herself as separate and apart from her captors”.

Literary critic who made an analysis of captivity narratives, state that “if freedom to writers like Smith, Rowlandson, and Wakefield is the ability to go back to their communities, regardless of the psychic toll it has taken on the individual identity, freedom for Erdrich's characters is to reestablish that community, to oppose counter discourses within themselves, and to be left to pursue their native traditions”. Relying on the above mentioned statement, we can note that all characters of Louise Erdrich lose everything, especially land, which is significant very much for all Native American tribes. However, this loss does not let them look down and they move forward, because they strongly believe in the spirits of their ancestors who do take care of them when the tribe is in need. The spirits of the ancestors are always

present and they always guide them in the new society even where new generations are Americanized.

At the end of the novel "Tracks" and "Love Medicine", the writer describes how Native American communities as tribes found salvation after violent and bloody reforms that left them with no land and traditions. In "Tracks" we see salvation in the union of tribal communities, while in "Love Medicine" we see two ways that lead salvation. The first one deals with establishing and rebuilding the female friendship between Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, the female members of the family. Lulu takes the role of retells the tribal history and the person who writes and keeps the history for the next generation. The second way to salvation is related to Lipsha, who acknowledges and follows the mysterious road of his parents: "[A] good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home".

The use of captivity narratives and addressing them in her novels, Louise Erdrich finds the ways to retell the history of her ancestors. This retold history breaks the silence and gives Native Americans an opportunity to be heard and remind the new generation of Native Americans in the US society who they are and whose generation they are. Moreover, this history reminds and teaches young generation the forgotten rituals and traditions in structuring and protecting their local Native American communities.

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