

RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE NOVELS OF LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE PLAGUE OF DOVES* AND TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

C. L. Shilaja*

Race, gender, and class may be conceptualized as systems of domination or systems of inequality. However, the novels of Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich depict the Native American and the African American in the experience of the non-European in America. Their novels structure people's lives, their relationships with other individuals and/or groups and the objects surrounding them in a constructive way. Moreover, these categories imply that the community is divided unequally between the groups distinguished by such categories. The category of race and ethnicity has served to divide the white from the person of color, while the category of gender has separated the non-whites into males and females. However, Louise Erdrich and Toni Morrison challenge the construction of these in their novels.

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DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE PLAGUE OF THE DOVES*

Louise Erdrich deconstructs the categories of male and female by the creation of characters who are androgynous. Even structurally, Erdrich's novels are gender balanced. The narrating consciousness is split equally between the male and the female, i.e., there is an equal number of male and female narrators. Louise Erdrich is keenly aware of the need to disrupt biological notions of gender. In many Native American cultures, which were not patriarchal, there was not a strict division of gender roles. Women served often as warriors and shamans. Western patriarchal culture, with its insistence on hierarchy, does not allow for such egalitarianism. 'Androgyny' subverts the rigidity of patriarchal taxonomy and we find Erdrich's writing subversive because it reveals to us the very arbitrary nature of these categories.

Louise Erdrich's novel *Plague of the Doves* begins with Evelina Harp, a precocious young girl who is part white and part Ojibwe. Evelina is nearly the androgyne archetype, a balancing out of all the novel's other characters into an androgynous whole. *The Plague of the Doves* moves between the feminine and the masculine voice and ends with a feminine voice in the final chapter. Evelina is solid and fearless, but at times fall victim to her intense emotions and passions.

Evelina does not do well in following the rules of the gender game, first apparent when she has a crush on one of the boys in the school play. Evelina does not resort to the tricks of the trade. She is not sweet, cunning and demure. She demands his

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Sathyabama University, Chennai.

affections in return. When he does not respond to her overtures, she throws punches, "I maneuvered right across from Corwin, punched him in the arm, hard, and said, "Love me or leave me." Then I marched away." (*Plague of the Doves* 11) Evelina's sense of herself is not limited by societally imposed ideas of femininity and womanhood. Her socialization is significantly different given her very traditional upbringing. Evelina Harp, a passionate, endearing young woman turns her crushes on her dangerous cousin to her writings of Anais Nin.

In Evelina's chapter, there exists a strong crosscurrent of feminine and masculine instinct. She is at times patient and passive and at other times fiercely aggressive. Evelina, like so many of Erdrich's women characters, embraces and expresses her sexual desire. Our sexual ideology prescribes in the form of strict heterosexuality and social behavior in the form of action; men should be masculine, women should be feminine.

In speaking of her sexual desire, Evelina discovers the diaries of Anais Nin and becomes obsessed with the writer who describes her numerous affairs with men and women in her voluminous writings. Her adoration is revealed: "Only one survivor of edgeless experience interested me, and she became my muse, my model, my everything Anais Nin" (ibid 115).

Another means of disrupting our expectations is in the way Evelina speaks her sexual desire. We are unaccustomed to women's writing or speaking of their pleasure frankly and openly the way men do. When Evelina gets a job as a psychiatric aide at a state mental hospital, she allows herself to be seduced by a patient, Nonette. In literature, mostly we find women as merely the objects of male sexual desire and we can rarely find the expression of female sexual pleasure and desire. Evelina, who surprisingly finds herself attracted to Nonette ends up in bed with her. "It is familiar, entirely familiar, much more so than if I were touching a boy I'd never touched before" (ibid 122).

Women are taught to shut off their libidinous drives, taught to hold out until they are in love, properly courted and so on. In Nonette's chapter there are repeated references to women's desire different from the traditional discourse. In fact, Erdrich creates women characters who challenge our sexual ideology. Erdrich's portrayal of Marn, suggests to the reader a darker, demonic and destructive side to women's nature. Marn, a devastated woman by her husband's sexual relationship with other women as a cult leader finds solace in her own fanaticism. She engages in snake handling which "I consider myself helpless, except when I held my serpents" (ibid 90).

Marn murders Billy to death with snake venom on the bed. In the scene where she confronts him, she describes herself as "...I decided that I hated him so much that I would not let him breathe until I'd soldered myself inside of him. Until I ruled him so that he could hurt no one" (ibid 93). She engages Billy in sex, narrated with the kind that is a characteristic storytelling style, which ends when she injects

him with the snake venom. She describes Billy's demise : "I took the needle filled with the venom of the snake and tipped with the apple of good and evil ..Then I pushed the needle quickly, gently, like and expert, for I'd seen this many times in my pictures, right into the loud muscle of his heart" (ibid 93).

Erdrich is part of a tradition of feminist writing, which aspires to help us understand ourselves anew and redefine our culture and ourselves. For Native American culture as well as for female culture, deconstructing previous myths and stories and constructing new ones is a matter of life and death and those stories must be in a language and imagery that is more flexible than that which were handed traditionally. In her portrayal of female characters, we find the roles played by them as hardly feminine.

Erdrich's deconstruction of gender and the use of androgynous figures are part of a larger concern that is a common link in feminist novels. Her novels throw away compartmentalization and fragmentation. Feminist novels analyze the adoption of roles because of role-playing which necessarily implies the narrowing of the personality; it is one form of compartmentalization. Erdrich's writings insist that male and female are not compartmentalized; they urge an overturning of rigid roles and freer distribution of gender traits between the sexes. In Erdrich's novels, wholeness requires an acceptance of contradiction and disorder, whether it is cultural or gender-related.

RACE IN THE NOVEL OF LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE PLAGUE OF THE DOVES*

Native Americans and colonized people all over the world are relegated to the periphery of the dominant cultures. The indigenous people of the America had been regarded by the whites who came to the continent as dark, mysterious, savage, different and therefore dangerous. Therefore, the goal of the Europeans had been to move the indigenous out, quite literally to the margins. Native Americans have made enormous strides to overcome the centuries of oppression they endured. Native Americans share the history of forced removal to reservations, white encroachment on Indian lands, white violation of Indian treaties and violence committed to the Indians.

Erdrich's characters are the damaged and the discarded-Native Americans exiled in their own homeland. "Solo" the prologue to the novel depicts the racial intolerance that leads to the lynching of three Indians. An unnamed killer who murders a family except for an infant in her crib walks away without a punishment. However, when the whites came upon the scene of murder they immediately believe that the Indians from the neighborhood are the murders. Without benefit of trial, the four including the narrator are taken off to be hanged. Mooshum, the narrator is cut down from the hanging tree before he dies, supposedly because he was related by marriage to one of the white families.

Corwin Peace, the wayward son of Maggie and John Wildstrand finds his place on the periphery. His marginalization does not weaken him; rather he seems to grow harder and tougher on the knowledge of his difference. He embraces his marginalization in a way that Evelina could not. Evelina admires him for it:

Corwin was one of those I see again and again. Of course, I knew more than I really should have about his origins. It would have been a miracle, I suppose, if he'd turned out well. He was a bad thing waiting for a worse thing to happen. A mistake, but one that we kept trying to salvage because he was so young. (ibid 102).

But despite his strength in accepting his marginalized stance, life on the margins is still quite difficult. "They picked up Corwin Peace pretending to play the fiddle in a Fargo mall and brought him to me (the Judge)...Then I sentenced Corwin to apprentice himself with the old master" (ibid 108).

Corwin's marginalized status can be attributed primarily to the fact that he is unlike the others in terms of behavior and appearance. But it is inappropriate behavior more than anything that separates Corwin. He knew what he wants and demands it greedily. Corwin is unable to do anything but overt and direct; he steals Shamengwa's precious violin which nevertheless helps him get in touch with his tribal heritage.

Mooshum too is one of the marginalized. A Chippewa, a recovering alcoholic, he is permanently exiled to the periphery. When he first runs away from the *Plague of Doves*, he finds he has disliked being an alter-boy. However, his rescuer makes him to run-away as the whites crowd on him for an uncommitted murder. Nevertheless, luck has him to flee again from his pursuers when they claim the death of Lorcherms from the innocent Indians.

The loss of the land and destruction of the natural world are also brought out by Erdrich in her novels. Past wrong and present hardships do figure in the work as she brings out the painful history of Indian-white relationship in her works. The novel, which begins at the early part of the twentieth century, threatens the community not by *The plague of doves* but by an influx of white residents. The white residents resent the very people on whose land they are building their town. The murder and lynching reverberates through the relationship within both the Indian and white communities. Inter-marriages lead to assimilation of native culture as white priests and the Christian church erode the traditional spiritual beliefs. The Priest tries to lure them to the church by giving them a preaching : "You may have sinned against the Holy Ghost by resisting known truth – the worth for instance of Holy Mass – thus hardening your soul to the penetrations of grace!" (ibid 16).

Erdrich reveals the terrible acts of racism in the reservation town of Pluto, in North Dakota where Native Americans are lynched for an uncommitted crime. Even though she writes about the fictional Ojibwe people, Erdrich raises important and relevant questions about the allotment and the loss of the tribal land.

ETHNICITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE PLAGUE OF THE DOVES*

Many of Erdrich's characters are for example ethnically mixed and their genealogies and family relationships are hard to trace. Her novel *The Plague of the Doves* centers on a murder of a white family and lynching of neighborhood Native Americans that occurred almost a century ago in a North Dakota reservation. Over the generations, Erdrich helps us to understand how marriages between the whites and Indians interlocked the lives of the two communities.

Erdrich's narrators unravel the stories of different generations and families torn by history. This is a story of a mixed community of the descendants of the mob, as well as the descendants of their victims, living together side by side in the community. Evelina Harp, a young girl, partly White and partly Ojibwe, goes to unravel the past in an attempt to understand the murder whose results still bear through the lives of the people in Pluto.

Evelina, of Chippewa-French ancestry begins to learn the history of her family. She gradually uncovers the reason as to why the Indians were treated as second-class citizens in society. Murder and lynching of a white family takes centre place in all their lives, of the Pluto town people. As Mooshum narrated his tale, Evelina is stunned noting that among the Indians captured in the area immediately after the murders, miraculously her grandfather was the only one who survived the hangings. She unravels the stories of the emergence of the town within the edge of the reservation land highlighting the influence of ethnicity.

According to Hertha "Women writers of color, in particular, seem to have returned to local roots—family, community, and ethnicity—as sources of personal identity, political change, and creative expression. Telling one's story or the story of one's people as an act of self-definition and cultural continuance is a strong collective impulse"(11). Erdrich's novel is centered on the Holy Track, thirteen year old lynching which an event is taken from North Dakota history that has occurred in 1897. She traces the connection between the characters and the families who have been most affected by the murder and the rough justice. "You know 13-year-olds – they're children. How can you lynch a child?" Erdrich asks in amazement during an interview, in Minneapolis.

Erdrich's response was to write about what happens "when vengeance is done ... but no justice is done." Erdrich honors the memory of the victim in naming one of the lynching victims in her novel as Paul Holy Track, after the 13-year-old victim of the historic lynching. When four Indians come upon the dead family of Lorchen they discover that a baby has been left alive in the house. As they come across the bodies of the murdered white family they tragically become the prime suspects. A gang of white men lynches the Indians in without any trial. Evelina says she became obsessed with lineage "I traced the blood history of the murders through my classmates and friends until I could draw out elaborate spider webs of lines and intersecting circles" (ibid 47).

The novel focuses on Native Americans who historically have been unrepresented or represented in manipulative ways in the service of a dominant group's ideology. In the real-life Emmons County lynching, a mob of 40 men stormed the jail, dragged off three defendants with ropes around their necks and hanged them from a beef windlass used to suspend cattle carcasses. One of the lynching victims was a French-Indian man who had been granted a new trial by the North Dakota Supreme Court. The others were Holy Track and another full-blooded Indian, according to a New York Times account of the lynching. Erdrich highlights the role not only of a narrative authority but also of cultural affiliation - on the part of the characters and of the reader - in the work of interpretation.

Mooshum's story of the murders and then the lynching had its repercussions, the first being that "I could not look at anyone in quite the same way anymore... I could not erase the questions underneath, and Mooshum was of no help"(ibid 47). The process of tracking requires the imaginative leap over boundaries - between past, present, and future. Erdrich's novels traverse boundaries in the process of enabling the unseen and the unvoiced to cross into voice and visibility. Erdrich allows readers to imagine the reverse process. That is, as one reads all the other stories, one can piece together the unsolved murder that has taken place on the reservation.

BLACK WOMEN AGAINST TRIPLE OPPRESSIONS IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

Morrison's most recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008), deconstructs the racial, gender, and class complexities. In *A Mercy*, Morrison portrays marginalized voices to rewrite the original narrative as a cautionary tale warning intended to reflect the disintegration and fragmentation of the native's sense of self and community. Her novel bears witness to the obliterated and often suppressed history of the Afro-Americans documenting the separated lines of race, gender, and class in the cause of privileging an ideology of whiteness. Morrison is interested in the portrayal of how characters experience in inter and intra-racial tensions, as well as class conflicts. *A Mercy* locates the effects of racial categorization and racial tension in a very specific historical context.

Black women in America being at once black, female and poor, have been victimized by the mountains of racism, sexism and capitalism not only from the white world but also from the men of the black world. They are, therefore, bearers of triple oppression- race, gender and class. The triple oppression of gender, race and class pushes black women to invent or imagine a new order in which previous roles and categories are redefined.

Through the character of Florens, Morrison illustrates how visual markers of race, particularly color, became one of the primary human differences in the late seventeenth century. Like Pecola, Florens hopelessly longs to possess the

conventional American standards of feminine beauty namely high-heeled shoes of Portuguese Lady as presented to her by the popular icons and traditions of white culture. This desire is especially strong in Florens, who believes that lady shoes will make her beautiful and lovable. Lina:

“Florens, she says, its 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady?” (*A Mercy* 4).

Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* provides an opportunity to look into the early years of America portrayed with its slavery, mistreatment of the Native Americans, and the hardship of diseases that were present. Morrison examines the roots of racism inherent in the early days of the country. When Vaark acquires Florens, she and her mother belonged to D’Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. Jacob Vaark goes to D’Ortega’s plantation to receive his payment, but D’Ortega insists that Jacob takes a slave as repayment. Slavery positioned her as object and denied her the experience of a normal childhood. Florens possesses no sense of self whatsoever once she no longer sees herself reflected in her mother’s eyes. Later when she sees the same unrecognizing gaze in the eyes of her mistress, after Vaark’s death she realizes that the tenuous bond between them has been broken; Rebekka now sees her as property and has “advertised [her] sale” (*ibid* 159)

The violence aimed at slaves was so incomprehensible that many could not face the reality of these horrors in their lives. Florens had to subject herself to the looks of these people who were but: “Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue . . . They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet” (*ibid* 112-13). Slaves faced extreme brutality in many forms and Morrison focuses on psychological humiliation and pain as the most terrifying forms of this abuse. On being sold in Barbados Floren’s mother receives the same treatment: “One by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths” (*A Mercy* 165).

Racism, Sexism and classism signify the traumatic past and harrowing memories in white America. There were systems of societal and psychological limitations that have gravely affected the lives of the blacks in general and African-American women in particular. In the eighteenth century America was more oppressive physically and mentally. It was a cause of grievance to the black women who were sexually subjugated by both the black and white men. “ . . . Smithy and Florens coiled around each other. . . .” (*A Mercy* 127).

Confronted on all sides, the black women suffered from twin disadvantages. Being black they suffered from racist exploitation and being female they were victims of sexual atrocities. Morrison also exploits the intraracial issues based on the prejudices caused by petty bourgeois Africans. *A Mercy* questions traditional masculine models of self-ownership, contradicting those humanist ideals against a

legacy of slavery and its notion of Black selfhood as the property of another. Lina describes Blacksmith as “He is not white, yet enjoys the freedoms of whiteness; he is black yet: “He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor” (ibid 45). In describing his profession, Morrison writes that he is blacksmithing like his father “and his father before him back and back for a thousand years” (ibid 68).

Clearly, Morrison’s class consciousness is reflected in her condemnation of those who share the class aspirations of their oppressors:

I want you to go...Because you are a slave...

Sir makes me that...

You have become one ...

I am adoring you...

And a slave to that too...(A Mercy 141)

For his own social survival he must maintain a clear separation between his free blackness and Florens’s enslaved blackness. Morrison interrogates the myths of dominant notions of masculinity, suggesting alternative means for African American men to establish their manhood. She rejects notions of manhood based on economic success or property attainment, focusing instead on philosophies that are more personal and blurring gender lines. Morrison thus analyzes the racist men who accept such patriarchal definitions of manhood and use them to evade communal responsibility. She takes issue with the adoption of white definitions of manhood by African American men, a model that she portrays as individualist, competitive, misogynist, and destructive.

In addition, Morrison is keenly aware of the need to disrupt biological notions of gender. As a result, she demonstrates through several characters that females can adopt masculine traits, and vice versa. Morrison describes Lina as a masculine character on several occasions. Her assertiveness and shrewdness cast her as masculine, interrupting simplistic biological notions of gendered behavior. Lina notes that the construction of mansion.

The first house Sir built—dirt floor, green wood—was weaker than the barkcovered one she herself was born in. The second one was strong. . . . There was no need for a third. Yet at the very moment when there were no children to occupy or inherit it, he meant to build another, bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated. . . . [H]e decided to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself. . . . Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up misfortune (43-44).

Cantiello in using the term *pre-racial*, suggests that Morrison means in *A Mercy* “before slavery and race were inextricably linked, “before it [race and racism] all got institutionalized” (167). Cantiello quotes that Morrison has made clear in her interviews on *A Mercy*, she wants “the text to trouble the connection between slavery and African Americans and to show that there was a time in which anyone

could be enslaved". Lina was quick to see that all of them, belonging to multi-racial family,— white landowners, black indentured servants, black and native female slaves, men and women—could not really be a family.

Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow's nest. Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan. . . As long as Sir was alive, it was easy to veil the truth, they were not a family. . . They were orphans, each and all (p. 59).

She takes on many typically male characteristics. Florens, isolated from her mother must be more assertive and forthright, again traditionally defined masculine characteristics. Florens travels to seek aid for the ailing Rebekka sharing a wagon with indentured whites. Moreover, she opens the novel with the "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you" (ibid 3), this can be read as her recording the history for the posterity. Jacob Vaark, or Sir, is a white landowner, who has made a vow to himself that he never will trade in human flesh. In addition, he takes on many characteristics normally associated with the feminine. Vaark though outraged by the offer of Florens, human flesh, yet he tells himself her service and presence will cheer his grieving wife, who has lost three infant sons and a beloved five year-old daughter, Patrician. Morrison demonstrates through her main characters the arbitrary nature of gender characteristics. Gender blurring in this manner demonstrates the fluidity of identity and its arbitrary connection to biology Slavery, class and gender inequity, betrayal, and brutality are described through the lives of the novel's characters.

Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich blend the personal and the political — for they feel very strongly that art should have meaning — to depict the cultural and social history. They do so in a way that resonates for readers of all ages, races, ethnicities, and genders. Their novels keenly disrupt the biological notions of gender. The novelists create settings in which characters must combat oppression (class, race, and gender) that undermine individual power and free will and in doing so offer hope for overcoming oppression.

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