

## **Historiographic Metafiction in Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves***

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**M. Perumal**<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D. research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English,  
Thiagarajar College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

**Dr. T.S.Varadharajan**<sup>2</sup>, Assistant Professor of English, PG and Research  
Department of English, Thiagarajar College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

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### **Abstract:**

The research paper aims to trace how Louise Erdrich explicates history in her novel *The Plague of Doves* and analyze its central issue about history and how it is presented. This paper references Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). This embodies the traits of "historiographic metafiction," a postmodern literary subgenre whose main objective is to refute generally accepted assumptions regarding historical investigations. It also focuses on the features that make it a particular case in the postmodern historical novel, and it tries to analyze this novel with utter importance from the historiographic metafictional perspective.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Historiographic metafiction, Colonialism, Native American, Ojibwe

### **Introduction**

Louise Karen Erdrich is a highly esteemed Native American author. Her writings heavily depict her upbringing, her family history, and Ojibwe culture. Her writings narrate an entangled web of tales about native people's identities, families, communities, societies, cultures, and humankind. Chippewa community of the Turtle Mountain and European American lineages are evident in her well-edited writing, even though Erdrich is primarily known as a thriving contemporary Native American writer. She is hailed as "one of the most significant writers of the second wave of Native American Renaissance" by Kenneth Lincoln. The novel's title alludes to the sickness that European settlers brought to America and inflicted on defenseless Native Americans. She draws attention to the discrimination, lynching, and difficult living circumstances faced by Native Americans in contrast to White people in this book.

Her work's context is what makes it noteworthy. Because of her storytelling style, her characters are frequently likened to those of William Faulkner. She successfully combines historical accounts into her writing, as seen by her body of work. She desires to preserve Native American culture by documenting historical narratives in the oral tradition. She uses a cast of characters to present several viewpoints on the narrative. All of these techniques have a sense of cultural traditions about them. Three critical elements of her writing include a fractured storyline, expressive language, and an ambiguous use of magic.

### **The Plague of Doves**

The novel's title portrays the history of America and alludes to the epidemic that European invaders brought upon the helpless Native people in America. It also suggests that the doves are, in fact, a pestilence that appears to be starving the people and ruthlessly demolishing their dwellings. In addition to winning the Anisfield-Wolf Novel Award, the novel advanced to the Pulitzer Prize semifinals. Philip Roth acclaims this novel as "the zenith of Louise Erdrich's imaginative freedom." In this novel, Erdrich explores the prejudices faced by Native Americans, such as racism and lynching, and also sheds light on the discriminatory practices faced by Native Americans.

The narrative takes place in North Dakota between 1916 and 1960, centered on the white colony known as Pluto. It offers a different perspective on Indian and white settlers' lives on reservations. The primary plotline centers on the brutal murder of five white Lochrens family members, who were cruelly murdered with only an infant escaping the atrocity. Unfortunately, a group of Indians who were traveling at the time were discovered close to the crime scene. Four of them were apprehended by the town's residents and lynched, while one escaped. From the lips of the one who lived through those lynchings, the agony was spoken. The lynching strained ties between Native Americans and White people.

The novel contains four different narrations, each linked to the town's horrific past; upon initially learning about the lynching narrative, Evelina Harp, the first narrator, endeavors to decipher the links. The second narrator, Judge Antone Bazil, begins by recounting how land was stolen from an Indian reservation and used to establish Pluto. He finally marries Evelina's aunt after they fall in love later in the novel. For a while, the account of Marn Wolde, the third narrator, seems disjointed. She leaves her house with Billy Peace, a preacher, and they gain popularity elsewhere. However, after a while, they return to Pluto, where Billy builds his church on the land her family owns.

Dr. Cordelia Lochren, who happens to be the baby who escaped the massacre, serves as the fourth and final narrator. The four narrators all try to reveal a history covered in many layers of bias. They are woven together they weave together the broken pieces of history. Erdrich shows how the beliefs of the advancing white population enslave Native Americans' faith and culture, and he does so by using a variety of narrators to highlight the irony of Native Americans being strangled.

### **Theory of Historiographic Metafiction**

"Historiographic metafiction" was first used by Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon, who specializes in Canadian Studies, opera, and literary theory and criticism. Hutcheon develops a fresh genre in postmodern historical fiction that she refers to as "historiographic metafiction." Hutcheon contends that the genre, like narrative history and historical fiction, needs to address the veracity of its facts and the makeup of its auxiliary materials, as follows:

Historiographic metafiction, like both historical fiction and narrative history, cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their "facts." and of the nature of their evidence and their documents. (Hutcheon, 1988, p.122).

She looks at the essential components of postmodern philosophy and applies her findings to historical fiction that represents uncertainties. This is a fresh approach to creating novels with the goal of improving the author's storytelling and historical rewriting skills. Cox and Reynolds (1993) claim that postmodernism denies the role of 'History' as the only access to the past and replaces it with the concept of 'histories'.

According to them, official history is the history of the prevailing authority, which obscures the history of the oppressed and marginalized people. Since postmodernism is the foundation of historiographic metafiction, it rejects the notion of a singular historical truth. This theory also presents oppressed people's eliminated histories by writing history and fiction side-by-side. Historiographic metafiction celebrates novels that incorporate both fictional and historical components simultaneously. It refuses the distinction between fiction and historical facts, as it asserts, "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (Hutcheon 5). Writing that responds to and contributes to reality or history is known as metafictional writing. Hutcheon asserts that postmodernist historical novels are historiographic metafiction because she employs metafiction in the writing of history. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction's objective is as follows:

What has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it: [in historiographic metafiction] we now get the histories of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and [...] of women as well as men. (Hutcheon, 1991: 66).

This research paper examines the elements of historiographic metafiction in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Plague of Doves*. The novel examines the theory's critical characteristics from multidimensional perspectives, namely socio-political and religious.

### **Historiographic metafiction in the select novel**

The novel's title, which portrays American history, alludes to the epidemic that European invaders brought upon the defenseless Native Americans in America. Additionally, it suggests that the doves are a pestilence that is deliberately demolishing people's homes and starving the inhabitants. Erdrich purposefully draws attention to the fact that what she does is a human fabrication since she is entirely aware of it, subtly challenging the historian's authority. Through historiographic metafiction, Louise Erdrich tries to explore the innumerable injustices Native

American people suffer from colonialism and highlight the reality of their tragedy, which remains the inner traumatic moment of the indigenous people's collective memory since colonization.

Erdrich's writing attempts to depict political issues, including historical events and how whites have neglected them. From this space, her voice finds a favorable ground, historiographic metafiction, for questioning and criticizing all forms of representation and for her work in the past and present. She writes novels to narrate the tragic history of native people, which has been going on for generations and till the present. In her writing, she writes down the fictional names of cities and real names as well in order to hand over to future generations of Natives and nonnative people. She also glorifies the heroism of native people's resistance and struggle.

The novel *The Plague of Doves* is intended to rewrite history and reveal the reality hidden by the dominance of white people. Additionally, this novel highlights the sufferings and traumatic experiences of native people in America. The Spicer Massacre is a true story that served as the inspiration for this fictional work. The events of the past continue to cause problems for the characters in the story. While taking cues from the Spicer Massacre, Erdrich presents the facts in a way that highlights the role of white people and Native American perspectives. This illustrates the continued impact on modern indigenous societies of the previous European atrocities towards Native Americans. To refute popular misconceptions about Native American violence propagated by Europeans, Erdrich narrates the mass homicide and presents an alternative account of what happened as well as the identity of the murderer.

The historian views historical figures and events as coherent objects that can be examined in detail and understood completely. This is also true of classic historical fiction; historical people and events are portrayed logically in their production without difficulty or doubt. In general, historians are confident in their ability to portray and convey their knowledge of the past, and part of their job is to find eyewitnesses and genuine documents, among other sources, etc. about a historical event from what White refers to as "the innocent eye," an unbiased viewpoint (White, 1978, p. 53). In historiographic metafiction, on the other hand, the narrator is unpredictable, and the subject appears to have migrated from its previous place. The novel's position as a human work is enhanced by this fragmentation, which creates narrative gaps that readers must fill up.

This novel is fictionalized to examine the horrific hardships faced by Native Americans, yet it is entirely based on a significant historical event. The narrative takes place in the imaginary town of Pluto, in North Dakota, in the middle of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recollections of a 1911 lynching by a white mob that claimed the lives of three Native Americans, including thirteen-year-old Holy Track, haunt the residents of the town. The mob blames Native Americans for the death of the Lochrens. According to the news report, the six-member Spicer family was savagely attacked and killed at their house in what is now North Dakota in 1897, "except two daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Spicer, who happened to be away from home at the time." (A Horrible

Deed, p. 2). After a farmer reported the event, police started hunting for the culprits. Although the identities of the killers of the Spicer family are still unknown, some people believe Native Americans were involved. In the manner described below;

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. (A Horrible Deed, p.2).

Another significant feature of historiographic metafiction, argued Linda Hutcheon, is the problematization of Cartesian subjectivism. It is traditionally believed that the subject historian or inferred author was a cohesive, independent, and self-sufficient entity that could see the natural world and provide objective information by logically interpreting it. In historiography, Erdrich's novel challenges the Cartesian conception of the topic by using a protagonist, Evalina, who is almost unstable or in a dilemma, to define her identity because her life is seen through three different stages: first, her childhood days connected with older people in her native world; second, her exposure to assimilate into a new world; and third, her return to the reservation land to her people. In her description of Métis, grandmother Evalina feels pride in her white ancestry, as follows:

A white ribbon was tied in her black hair, and her white dress flowered bodice was embroidered with white petals and white leaves. 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, p.11-12).

Evelina presents herself reading the absurdist work of Albert Camus while displaying her oddity in life. She also exhibits a contradictory picture of being a bi-cultural person in the society of her time. Erdrich's self-reflexivity is seen in the second phase of Evalina, how she faces mixed blood culture and a confused state of her identity:

The Indian women I knew were shy and very studious, although some swaggered around furious in ribbon shirts with AIM-looking boyfriends. I did not fit in with anybody. We were middle-class BIA Indians and I wanted to go to Paris. (PD, p.222)

Another feature of the novel *The Plague of Doves* that distinguishes it as historiographic metafiction is its wide range of narration, which tells the story from several points of view. The whole story of the novel revolves around the character Mooshum, who embodies the historical figure Holy Track, who escaped from the lynching. From the perspective of the character Mooshum, Erdrich attempts to trace the hidden truth of the gruesome lynching and rewrites history to explore trauma encountered by native people. The book's first narrator, Evalina Harp, learns about actual history through her grandfather Mooshum's tale. Through the portrayal of Evalina Harp, the author demonstrates historical awareness and self-reflection, enabling the reader to critically analyze the depictions made in her work.

The Native American figure Mooshum, who manages to flee from a site of lynching, and his sibling Shamengwa, who strives to revive the younger generation's faith, have been portrayed as illustrations of the realities of the new faith and society. From these two characters, Erdrich attempts to explore the cultural and religious resistance of Native people, especially to analyze the character Mooshum from the narration of Evalina Harp and how the native people reluctantly accepted Christianity and later resisted the same in American history. In the story of the novel, Father Cassidy, a Catholic priest, visits Mooshum's home, where his conversation with the priest is clearly visible to find the religious resistance of the natives.

On Father Cassidy's final visit, Mooshum and his brother Shamengwa consume liquor. Upon the Father's arrival home, they pretend to hide their bottles. Still, after some time, Mooshum drinks deliberately and makes harsh denunciations about Christian rituals, particularly the transubstantiation and Eucharist, which are Christian ceremonies to commemorate the last supper in which bread and wine are consecrated. Mooshum, in his argument with Father Cassidy, denounces religion as;

That is the transubstantiation, which is to say you speak of the most sacred aspect of our mother, the church, as represented in the Holy Mass."..... Mooshum leaned forward, questioning, "Then do you mean to tell me that the body and blood is just eh, in your head like? Does the bread stand in for the real thing? Then I could see your point. Otherwise, the Eucharist is a cannibal meal. (PD, p.40)

Another significant aspect of historiographic metafiction is the blend of history in fiction: the land of natives taken by whites who founded Pluto Town. Judge Antone Bazil serves as the book's second narrator and begins by recounting the history of the founding of the town of Pluto. In his first meeting with Geraldine, Antone Bazil describes how the land occupied by whites and Natives is forced to switch their economic base away from farming. He also adds that Henri and Lafetette once spared his grandfather's life. In this narration, the writer understands the need to explore how natives terminated their relations with the United States government. He states as follows;

We talked about history and mused a little about the future. Our reservation as it stands now is bordered by three – Hoopdance, Argus, and Pluto. that last being closest, but on the western boundary....most recently, when we traveled to fight a policy that would have terminated our relationship with the United States government guaranteed by treaty, only one lawyer from Pluto, stood up for us. ( PD, p.91,92)

The novel is the best example of multiple perspectives; its fragmented structure and natural history are evident characteristics of historiographic metafiction. Thus, Erdrich blends historical events with fictional construction to portray the natives to whom the readers can relate in her fiction.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper analyses the historiographic metafictional elements present in *The Plague of Doves*. For her writings, Louise Erdrich draws on historical accounts of Native American tribes and her collection of Ojibwe folktales. Erdrich recreates actual incidents of the murder of a white family and the slaughtering of Indian men who were accused of that murder by a white mob through the novel *The*

*Plague of Doves*, which happened under colonial rule. It demonstrates how the past has left lasting wounds on the psychological development of Native Americans who were exposed to and heard about social violence.

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