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Postcolonial Religion and Motherhood in the Novels by Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker

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Postcolonial Religion and Motherhood in the Novels by Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative analysis of the works of the Native American author Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine, Tracks*) and the African American writer Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*). Originating from different cultural traditions, Native American and African American women writers address common themes in their novels because of their common colonial background. One of the main themes in their writings is that of religion. Despite becoming victims of Christianity used as a means of cultural colonization, both African American and Native American communities reinterpret it in terms of their traditional religious beliefs and create a new, unique hybridized form of spirituality characteristic of postcolonial societies. The other theme examined in my work and present in the novels of both authors is the theme of motherhood. While being exposed to the white middle-class familial structure and values, Native and black families succeeded nevertheless in retaining and maintaining their cultural heritage by subversion of the Western family standards through adherence and preservation of their traditional family organizations and gender roles.

Introduction

Both African American and Native American cultures have been excluded from the postcolonial discourse dominated by major Western European colonial powers (France, Great Britain) and the Third World countries colonized by them, because they, obviously, deviate from this “traditional” colonial enterprise. But while African Americans did not experience territorial colonization (like Native Americans, Africans, Southeast Asian, and Australian aborigines), they still can be claimed as victims of internal colonization, including forced migration, dispossession, slavery, economic exploitation, cultural repression, political disenfranchisement, and genocide (Cotten 14). Native Americans, on the other hand, having endured traditional territorial, political, and cultural colonization, have never regained control over their ancestral land, which means that they are still subjected to the rule of the U.S. government. Nevertheless, they both share with conventionally colonized nations a long tradition of extensive and traumatic resistance to the legacies of colonial domination and an aspiration to rediscover cultural practices and values that existed prior to colonial conquest as well as to reinvent their cultural identities. As Richard King argues, the application of the term “postcolonial” to the United States will help to broaden the scope of postcolonial studies by challenging the canonical nature of the field that revolves exclusively around specific thinkers and texts which stay loyal to Europe and its former colonies, mainly British and French

territories in Africa and Asia, neglecting the postcolonial tendencies of other cultures, America in particular (3). Moreover, it will help to draw connections and identify differences and similarities between traditional (African, Asian) and American lived experiences of the colonized.

An influential postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha also offers an inclusive delineation of the fundamental features of postcolonialism that breaks down the barriers that some postcolonial theorists have erected:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority...Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the rationalizations of modernity. (171)

Bhabha's description of fundamental postcolonial features justifies the discussion of the African American position within the American society in light of the postcolonial discourse, given the fact that they (African Americans) form a considerably large community of nonindigenous people whose ancestors were brought to the American colonies as slaves and who were identified as racially distinct, deprived of their civil rights, discriminated against, and actively separated (even excluded) from the white population of the nation-state. American Indians, on the other hand, forcefully evicted from their native land, although avoiding the yoke of slavery, went through the similar set of blatant deprivations and severe limitations of their basic human, let alone civil rights.

In order to define whether postcolonial theory is relevant to African American and Native American studies in general and black American and Native American literature in particular, it is crucial to identify its elemental concepts. Referring to *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, John Gruesser names three crucial concepts of postcolonial theory: “the center-periphery opposition, the displacement experienced by colonized persons, and the hybrid character of postcolonial writing” (7). The center-periphery relationship is inextricably connected to the problem of language. In many cases being forced to inscribe their stories into the history in the language of a colonizer, colonized people transform the language in a way that reflects the peculiarities of their environment and culture. The displacement experienced by colonized people usually takes place in the form of alien language and culture forced on them. Finally, the notion of hybridity, introduced to the discourse by Homi Bhabha, regards the heterogeneity of postcolonial culture as a strength rather than weakness. It is important to mention that hybridization is not a one-way, but rather a mutual process, as a result of which new forms, which arise from the clash of cultures characteristic of imperialism, are created (Gruesser 8). Exposure to both metropolitan and peripheral cultures enables the possession of a “double vision,” which appears to be a direct reflection of hybridity. Such vision, undoubtedly, suggests the more complex position of a colonized subject in terms of culture, for it widens the worldview by eradicating monolithic perceptions.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin also provide a rather broad (which also might be perceived as inclusive) definition of postcolonial literatures, according to

which contemporary African American and Native American literature shares with traditionally postcolonial literatures the fact of having

emerged in [its] present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted [itself] by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing [its] differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes [it] distinctively postcolonial. (qtd. in Krupat 169)

Commenting on the U.S. – Native American relations, which are predominantly conditioned by ongoing social tensions, Rebecca Tillett also supports the idea of application of postcolonial theory to Native Studies. She contends that Native writings “exhibit a range of strategies of resistance” and are presented “as an alternative to Euro-American literary techniques and expectations, and as a form of active resistance to imperial worldviews, but also as a discussion and celebration of Native cultural ideas and values” (Tillett 8-9).

Although colonized by the same power – the United States – the Native American and African American situations differ considerably. Yet both ethnic groups had to endure similar mechanisms of cultural colonialism, which included loss of native languages, enforced conversion to Christianity, and imposition of the Western system of education. All this introduced numerous changes and distortions to the traditional ways of those communities and, thus, evoked a number of strategies of resistance to the colonizing power. Therefore a comparative analysis of the works of Native American and African American female writers will help to identify the points of intersection and divergence of these authors’ experiences as colonized subjects as imagined in their literary works and mark specific patterns of the way power relations define the lived experiences of oppressed people.

In Chapter One, I locate the writings of Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker in the historical and cultural context by examining the social movements leading up to the intellectual dynamics of the 1980s. Following the chronological order of their emergence, I look at the civil rights and the mainstream feminist movements in relation to the black feminist movement and trace a similar dynamic in Native American women's relations to the American Indian and the white feminist movements.

In Chapter Two, I analyze the novels of Louise Erdrich (*Tracks* and *Love Medicine*) and Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*). I observe the theme of religion present in both authors' novels and argue that the hybridized or syncretic forms of spirituality they depict in their works are the characteristic feature of the postcolonial discourse.

In Chapter Three, I refer the common theme of motherhood in the novels. I explore the ways in which retention by the African American and Native American communities of the traditional African and Native cultural values subverts the white middle-class ideal of motherhood by diverging from the standard white family structures and rigid gender roles and supplanting it with a vision of the mother as an essential force in the society.

Chapter 1: Contextualizing the 1980s: from the Civil Rights to the Postcolonial Feminist Movements

Having been written in the 1980s, Louise Erdrich's and Alice Walker's novels present ideas and attitudes specific to that cultural period. Thus, in order to gain a clearer insight into these writings, it is necessary to locate them in this historical and cultural context. This chapter examines the social movements leading up to the intellectual dynamics of the 1980s. Adhering to the chronological order of their rise, I will first discuss the civil rights and the mainstream feminist movements in relation to the black feminist movement; then I will trace a similar trend in Native American women's relations to the American Indian and the white feminist movements. The emergence of liberation movements in the 1960s shook the social and political foundations of American society. As traditionally oppressed and continuously degraded groups of Americans rebelled against the system of white patriarchy, which had been embedded, institutionalized, justified, and successfully maintained since the times of colonization, the old American dream of "freedom and justice for all" was revived and fueled the struggle against racial, sexual, and economic oppression. Although seemingly inclusive and all-embracing, these social movements are revealed in historical hindsight, as similarly exclusive and discriminating as the social order they strived to undermine. Thus, for instance, the role of American women of color, who had become an active and

crucial force in the struggle, was extremely diminished and portrayed as insignificant. Accordingly, their needs and interests were disregarded and excluded from the political agendas of the movements. Particularly, African American and Native American women were caught in between their ethnic liberation movements, which were predominantly male-oriented, and the American feminist movement, led by white, upper-middle class women. On having experienced alienation from both of them, African American and Native American women writers and political activists started theorizing their own, inclusive discourses of feminism.

Black Women in the Black Liberation and the Mainstream Feminist Movements

In the 1960s, when more and more attention was finally being given to the long history of the black freedom struggle in the United States, the role and contributions of black women to it continued to be neglected. As Pauli Murray noted at the beginning of the 1970s: “Of approximately 800 full-length articles published in the *Journal of Negro History* since its inception in 1916, only six have dealt directly with the Negro woman. Only two have considered Negro women as a group...” (188). Although the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by its inclusiveness, based on the active participation of men, women, and children without regard to age and sex, black men appeared to be the center of black communal resistance, and possessed an exclusive right to articulate common aspirations and strivings, while “[t]here has been very little public discussion of the problems, objectives, or concerns of black women” (Murray 189).

However, the civil rights male activists did not simply dismiss black women from the political agenda of the movement. On the contrary, black women played an important

role in the process of the black male uplift, for the continuation of their subjugation and victimization testified to the fact that black men vigorously supported the institutionalized system of patriarchy, which aligned them with white men (hooks 93). Bell hooks draws a historical parallel between the 19th century and the 20th century roles that black men allotted to black women:

Just as 19th century black male leaders felt that it was important that all black men show themselves willing to be protectors and providers of their women as a sign to the white race that they would tolerate no more denial of their masculine privilege, 20th century black male leaders used this same tactic. Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka and other black male leaders have righteously supported patriarchy. They all argued that it is absolutely necessary for black men to relegate black women to a subordinate position both in the political sphere and in home life. (94)

Thus, on the one hand the civil rights and black power male leaders vigorously attacked white men for their racism, on the other hand, they still strived to bond with them on the shared ground of sexism and violent oppression of their women (hooks 95). So, while it is important to acknowledge numerous economic and social gains for the black people obtained as a result of the black liberation movement, yet, they do not justify or diminish the negative effects of “anti-women attitudes that emerged in much black power rhetoric” (hooks 98).

The feminist movement emerging at the end of the 1960s instilled even more confidence in black men in relation to their white counterparts because it seemed black men could still control “their” women, whereas white patriarchy was threatened by a new wave of white women’s political activism. This also raises the question of the role of black women in the feminist movement. The strengthening of a black men’s patriarchal

position in regard to black women implies the fact that black women were barely included and doubtfully benefitted from the mainstream of American feminism.

African American women faced oppression not only within the male-dominated civil rights and Black Power movements, but also within the mainstream American feminist movement. Although historically white women had tried to redirect public attention from the issues of racism to those of sexism by comparing their experiences with the plight of black people, the two can hardly be equated (La Rue 163). As Linda La Rue explains, "...the American white woman has had a better opportunity to live a free and fulfilling life, both mentally and physically, than any other group in the United States, with the exception of her white husband" (164). Black people, certainly, are positioned on the lower level of the social hierarchy, which La Rue distinguishes by using different terminology:

It is time that definitions be made clear. Blacks are oppressed, and that means unreasonably burdened, unjustly, severely, rigorously, cruelly, and harshly fettered by white authority. White women, on the other hand, are only suppressed, and that means checked, restrained, excluded from conscious and overt activity. And there is a difference. (166)

Moreover, it is crucial to differentiate between black male and female social positions. Having always been one step above in the social hierarchy, "black men were more accepted in white reform circles than women" (hooks 130) and eventually they become representative of, even synonymous with the entire race. Thus, when white women draw parallels between themselves and black people, they, as a rule, imply black men, not black women (hooks 133). At the same time, though ostensibly proclaiming and advocating the notions of sisterhood and solidarity, which means female bonding across

both race and class boundaries, white women appropriated the term “woman,” making it applicable only to white women:

In America, white racist ideology has always allowed white women to assume that the word woman is synonymous with white woman, for women of other races are always perceived as Others, as de-humanized beings who do not fall under the heading woman. White feminists who claimed to be politically astute showed themselves to be unconscious of the way their use of language suggested they did not recognize the existence of black women. (hooks 138-139)

This reveals the limiting and exclusive nature of the women’s liberation struggle. By intentionally constructing the movement to serve predominantly the interests and needs of middle- and upper-class, college-educated white women in their striving for social equality with white men, white women themselves undermined their own myth about the “common oppression” of all women as a uniting force, and inclined black women to renounce their involvement in the women’s movement.

By the early 1970s, in response to white feminist endeavors to obscure their participation in the movement, African American women began forming separate black feminist groups and developing black feminism “as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (“A Black Feminist Statement” 232). Thus, for example, in 1973 in New York black feminists organized the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which focused mainly on the interconnectedness of a whole range of oppressions black women were forced to face. The Combahee River Collective, 1974, was an essential black socialist feminist organization. It consisted of former black liberation movements’ activists who had experienced disillusionment within them and felt the need “to develop a politics that was

antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men” (“A Black Feminist Statement” 233).

At the same time, the political activism of the U.S. women’s movement was extending itself into the academic arena. Women Studies programs were launched at a number of American universities and there appeared to be a considerable increase of interest in women’s literature among academics and literary critics. Nevertheless, black female writers, like their politically active counterparts, continued to be excluded from the feminist literary discourse. Even if any commentary on their works could be found in feminist journals, as Barbara Christian contends, they were addressed “as black, not women, writers” (8).

According to Barbara Smith, black feminist literary criticism was left “homeless” because of the sexism of African American literary/intellectual circles and the racism of white feminist literary journals. She expressed her indignation with the dearth of attention allotted to black female authors, while the critical literature on white women’s writing could be found in surplus: “I think of the thousands and thousands of books which have been devoted by this time to the subject of Women’s Writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of these pages that mention black and other Third World women” (Smith, qtd. in Christian 8-9). Working herself at the end of the 1970s on the book *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition*, Barbara Christian had to face the difficulty of demonstrating the existence of the black women’s writing literary tradition because, first of all, even the existing books were hardly available, while the historical material – the contexts in which black female literature had evolved – was almost absent.

In the 1980s, however, the situation began to change. A crucial role in this change was played by black female authors who managed to evoke interest in their writing among African American intellectual circles. Barbara Smith relates such revitalization of African American female literature to the rise of the black feminist movement. Seeing a direct connection between a political movement and black feminist political theory, which, in its turn, formed “a basis for a critical approach to the art of black women” (Carby 8), Smith argues that the political movement provided “power and support to those who want to examine Black women’s experiences” (Smith, qtd. in Carby 7-8). Many black female writers combined their political and literary activities, while others were “themselves doing black feminist criticism” (Christian 12). Thus, Alice Walker, for instance, introduced the term “womanist,” adopted by black feminists in order to mark their essential differences from the mainstream white American feminism.

The white feminist movement in the 1980s was preoccupied with fighting against the “backlash” dominant in the mainstream American culture, which Susan Faludi defined as “a powerful counterassault on women’s rights...an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women” (Faludi, xviii). This counterassault was directed against the advancement achieved by women in the previous decades and was based on turning this progress in the field of women’s rights and freedoms against its subjects and “recruiting women to attack their own cause” (*ibid.*). Blaming women’s personal discontent (for example, “the man shortage” or “the infertility epidemic”) on their social and political activism and newly acquired economic independence, the “backlash” advocated the return and revitalization

of the traditional white middle-class family values, such as a two-parent household and stay-at-home mothers.

These dynamics in the white feminist movement and the mainstream American culture had a profound effect on the popular perception of black families, which were rendered as dysfunctional according to the white middle-class values. Thus, for instance, in her article “Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society” Gloria Joseph noted that “Far too often, research on Black families, child-rearing practices, discipline, rewards, and aspirations follow patterns of research that are based on middle-class White values” (Joseph 76). She criticized this method of application of the white familial patterns to the relationships within black families erroneous, for it ignored the impact of the existing economic and racist conditions on psychological dynamics in those families. Moreover, it neglected “the explanations and interpretations of Black women regarding their own historical and cultural experiences as Black women” (*ibid.*).

Between Race and Gender: Native American Women’s Activism

In the early 1970s, Native American women as well found themselves at the crossroads when pressured to choose between struggling against racial and gender oppression. Despite the fact that their political concerns had much in common with those of African American writers and activists, Native women found it more difficult to reject the patriarchal aspects of the Native American movement in the name of self-empowerment. Instead, they strived to find a successful approach to put feminism within a framework of Native American activism. Thus, when Native women “identify

themselves as ‘feminists,’ they often mean they are ‘Native Activists,’ concerned with more than just female marginalization” (Mihesuah 162).

One such approach was for Native American feminists to prioritize their opposition to the colonial power of the United States, blaming the American colonial enterprise for the destructive changes it had introduced to their traditional tribal gender roles. For example, in 1986 Paula Gunn Allen decried “the devaluation of women that has accompanied Christianization and westernization” (202). In her opinion, the dramatic increase in violence against Native women by men, caused by European-American influences, was of primary importance. Also, as Lorelei DeCora stated in the 1970s:

We are American Indian women, in that order. We are oppressed, first and foremost, as American Indians, as peoples colonized by the United States of America, not as women....Decolonization is the agenda, the whole agenda, and until it is accomplished, it is the only agenda that counts for American Indians. (Lorelei DeCora, qtd. in Mihesuah 162)

Pursuing the goal of decolonization and national liberation, many Native women became actively involved in the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s. However, their role in it, like that of African American female activists in the civil rights and Black Power movements, was largely ignored, and the organization was dominated by men. As Devon Abbott Mihesuah contends, the male AIM leadership “depended on women to cook and clean for them, they preferred that women stay in the background. They did not seem impressed with the ‘masculine’ roles many women played in the takeover” (Mihesuah 119).

Native American women’s relationship with the white feminist movement was similarly rather uneasy. Since a lot of Native women believed that the detrimental

changes in the tribal gender roles stemmed from American subjugating policy, they tended to “fight for racial liberation in order to transcend the effects of colonialism that may cause tribal men to behave abusively in the first place” (Mihesuah 162). Despite this, however, many Native women related to the women’s movement and could “identify themselves as ‘feminists’” (*ibid.*).

Paula Gunn Allen, for example, advocated the analysis of “tribal cultural systems from a mainstream feminist point of view,” and argued that this

allows an otherwise overlooked insight into the complex interplay of factors that have led to the systemic loosening of tribal ties, the disruption of tribal cohesion and complexity, and the growing disequilibrium of cultures that were anciently based on a belief in balance, relationship, and the centrality of women, particularly elder women. (223)

She contends that

A feminist approach reveals not only the exploitation and oppression of the tribes by whites and white government but also areas of oppression within the tribes and the sources and nature of that oppression. To a large extent, such an analysis can provide strategies for ameliorating the effects of patriarchal colonialism, enabling many of the tribes to reclaim their ancient gynarchical, egalitarian, and sacred traditions. (ibid.)

However, partial acceptance of the white feminist discourse did not lead to a complete merging of Native women with it. Instead, they, as well as African American women, formed their own feminist organizations – Women of All Red Nations (1974) – in order to deal with a variety of social issues pertinent to them as Native American women.

The emergence of political and social activism among Native women found its accompaniment in literature. In fact, the “recovery and privileging of previously silenced female voices” appeared to be “a key benefit of feminist theory” (Tillett 68). Indeed,

while due to the legacy of colonialism and federal-Indian relations most Native voices had been elided, Native women's voices had remained suppressed as well at a local level by communal or individual conditions. In 1980, Rayna Green in her "Essay Review: Native American Women" noticed "a lack of literary critical works" on Native American women (Green, qtd. in Hollrah 18), which resembled the dynamic in African American literary criticism. Looking at some works on Native women written across various disciplines, she concluded that the "real experience of Indian women's lives does not appear until the 1970s, when the work of Indian women poets is published" (Green, qtd. in Hollrah 19). Concurring with Green's argument, Patrice Hollrah attributes the appearance of "important critical works on Native women" (*ibid.*) to the 1980s and 1990s.

Rebecca Tillett calls the 1980s generation of Native women writers "writing women" (67). She states that inspired by the achievements of predecessors, such as Momaday, Welch, and specifically Leslie Marmon Silko, they focused on certain obscured aspects of Native culture, including the "complex realities of Native women's lives," in particular their traditional roles "eroded by colonialism, and by contact with the institutionalized sexism of Euro-American culture" (*ibid.*). For example, Patrice Hollrah in her book *The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell": The Power of Women in Native American Literature* introduces and examines the concept of "gender complementarity" in the writings of several Native American authors, including Louise Erdrich. In particular, she argues that the political ramifications of gender complementarity (or equal importance of male and female contributions to the community) "for women in Native American literature result in strong female characters" in the works of Native women

authors. Thus, the writings of major female authors of this period undertook the task of depicting Native women's experiences more fully and inclusively.

Louise Erdrich, in particular, succeeded in expanding the predominantly racially and nationally oriented concerns of earlier Native writing by “engaging with some of the emerging concerns of feminism,” or, specifically, its Native discourse (Tillett 67). Thus, while continuing the practice previously established by earlier Native authors of “writing back” to the Euro-American literary tradition, Erdrich in her fiction offers a broader perspective on the Native American realities by integrating the complex experiences of Native women's lives. Moreover, her creative work responds to larger dynamics within the feminist movement, such as “the emergence of ‘Third World’ feminism to address implicit racist assumptions of the seemingly ‘color blind’ feminist movement” (*ibid.*). Along with other ethnic women writers of the period, Louise Erdrich strived to undermine the constructed notion of women as a “homogenous group” by “highlighting key cultural and political specificities which were crucial to the development of Native women's literature in this era” (Tillett 68).

The development of the racial and feminist movements in the United States corresponds to larger historical phases of colonialism, anticolonialism, and postcolonialism. The Civil Rights Movement, as well as the liberal phase of the feminist movement (1963-1968) is characterized by the colonial striving for assimilation and inclusion through disregard of differences. Along with radical feminism, the Black Power movement (1970s) repudiates the previously proclaimed goal of inclusion into the mainstream American society, instead advocating separatism and calling for a profound social change. Both agitated for the formation of their own society on the basis of their

own values. Finally, in the 1980s radicalism subsided to a more moderate ideology of race and gender relationships. The ideology of multiculturalism cultivates the image of American society as a web that embraces and conflates all diversities. Postcolonial discourse is characterized by a similar dynamic of integrating and utilizing the differences instead of rejecting them, which points to the hybridized and subversive nature of postcolonial subjects. In the works of Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker, religion and motherhood are the areas where those two postcolonial dynamics are revealed and worked through the novels, as the following chapters describe.

Both Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Louie Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* are texts representative of the cultural moment of the 1980s. Written by the women of color within a postcolonial paradigm, they help understand more generally how postcolonial dynamics work in the Native American and African American literature. Although there are two of them, Erdrich's novels are an integral part of her larger cycle of the "North Dakota novels." These are five novels that "are connected to one another, sharing a setting in the North Dakota landscape and a community of characters whose loves frequently intersect" (Stookey 17). *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* display a special unity in terms of the characters, as well as geographical and chronological setting of the texts. In fact, Erdrich's first published novel, *Love Medicine*, presents a continuation of the story deployed in *Tracks*. Moreover, the two novels exemplify an essential transition from a colonial to a postcolonial mindset, traced in the chosen themes of religion and motherhood. A similar feature is characteristic of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, in which this transition is revealed through the same themes in the scope of one book.

Chapter 2: Indigenous, Catholic, or Both: the Theme of Religious Syncretism in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

Colonizing Role of Christianity

Christianity, whether Catholicism or Protestantism, was and partly still remains one of the government's most fervent and devoted allies in the colonial enterprise. In this respect, it functions not as a spiritual practice, but is rather utilized as a mere instrument of discipline, a means of social control and cultural extermination. Undertaking a seemingly noble goal of educating and civilizing Native people and slaves, missionaries, as a rule, pursued much broader social and political objectives. Mark Nicholas notes that conversion to Christianity for the majority of Native Americans, as well as African Americans, "was more than just learning the faith" (Nicholas 279). Instead, it meant "an attempted stripping away of indigenous lifeways in order to replace them with a new culture" (*ibid.*).

The Euroamerican perception and interpretation of Christianity as a source of power is revealed in the fact that, according to Gayraud Wilmore, initially the English settlers had no intentions of imposing their own religion on the slaves. It was considered a dangerous enterprise, for "a baptized slave might get the foolish idea that freedom in Christ had to include freedom from bondage" (Wilmore 29). Such a liberating message, albeit endemic to Christianity, would have contradicted the primary objectives of the colonizers to prove their superiority and their natural right to subjugate and rule over

black people. Moreover, “conversion of slaves was also thought to be unreasonable, because who would suppose that people who were believed to be little more than savages could understand the Christian religion well enough to be benefited by it?” (*ibid.*).

This indifference to the spiritual aspect of the slaves’ life from the side of slaveholders granted black people an opportunity to develop “the belief system they brought...[from]...across the Atlantic” and “to transform much of their traditional culture into their new condition” (West 50). However, the possibility of unification of the slaves around their quite diverse, but still native cultural and religious practices seemed to be even more threatening. Thus, during the period of the Great Awakening of the mid-1700s Christian ministers gradually succeeded in persuading slaveholders that “religion sustained rather than threatened slavery, and slave churchgoing came to seem less and less threatening” (Joyner 21). But, as Charles Joyner underscores, Christian messages addressed to white and black people were considerably different, for the latter “was very selective, emphasizing obedience in the here and now as much as salvation in the hereafter” (22). The content of the sermons delivered to black people had to be strictly controlled: while deliberately evading the topics that might provoke disorder and rebellion, white preachers promoted order and docility among slaves.

Syncretic Nature of Native American and African American Religiosity

Black people, nevertheless, did not uncritically absorb and fully adopt Christianity in the form offered by Euroamericans. Instead, they “reinterpreted the elements of Christianity in terms of deep-rooted African religious concerns” thus producing a “unique and creative synthesis of both” (Joyner 37). According to Elizabeth West, black people learned to “appropriate the language of Christian salvation to proclaim their humanity

and their rights in the eye of the divine authority” (West 48). The Bible was used as the “written authority” that justified their calls for equality and justice and was adopted by African Americans “to tell the story of black experience in America” (West 48-49). In this new version of Christianity many features of African religion either converged or coexisted with traditional Christian characteristics. Gayraud Wilmore provides an example of such “confluence”:

Where they adopted new ideas and rituals that were similar to the old ones they knew back home, the African forms were strengthened rather than discarded, although it is more accurate to say that they were gradually transformed. The Africanized Christianity that flourished on southern plantations, often to the disgust and dismay of the White missionaries, included some characteristics that were unfamiliar to White Christians. For example, there was much dancing and singing in the African style of ‘call and response’; drumming (whenever permitted, for the masters were afraid that drums might signal revolt); elaborate nighttime funeral customs; spirit possession; and conversion experiences that involved flying, traveling great distances, or encountering spirit guides, of one kind or another, in dreams and visions. (30)

Unlike white ministers, slave preachers were much less cautious not to sow “the seeds of discontent” in black people’s minds (Joyner 27). On the contrary, as Joyner contends, the major slave insurrections of the Old South were planned and conducted under the cover of various religious associations.

Serving as a source of cultural values and helping black people to understand their position in the world and in relation to other people, slaves’ hybridized religion involuntarily evoked indignation and rebellion among black people. Charles Joyner asserts that “sufficient evidence remains to testify to the existence of an underground stream of magical shamanism, not only throughout the slavery period, but long beyond” (34). Thus, voodoo, or hoodoo, was resorted to for both protective and evil purposes: “it

could cure an illness, kill an enemy, or secure someone's love" (*ibid.*). But Christian imprints could be uncovered even in those genuinely pagan practices. Since the African names for the hoodoo deities were forgotten, "their personalities converged with those of Judeo-Christian prophets and saints, demons and devils," becoming another instance of the way, in which this hybrid religious form functioned. Thus, "Whether Africans had adopted Christianity or dismissed it, they were, out of necessity, compelled to transform their religion" (West 52) and negotiated their African worldview into a Christian framework by creating syncretic forms of spirituality.

Similarly, the encounters between Christian missionaries and Native people were more ambiguous than it might at first seem, since the influences of those cultural traditions were rather mutual, not unidirectional. Using the notion of "cultural capital" to explain the positions of power and authority with which missionaries endowed themselves, Nicholas contends, nevertheless, that "cultural capital does not follow the one path most commonly studied, from missionaries to Native peoples," but instead veers "in many directions – from missionaries to Natives; from Native Americans to missionaries; and from one indigenous people to another" (277). Supporting this argument, Michael McNally also emphasizes the complicated nature of the Native - Christian encounters by stating that they "could transform missionaries even as their missionary projects could transform the cultures of Native communities" (289). Moreover, he challenges the generally accepted exclusively negative effects of this interaction by highlighting its more diverse nature:

Missionary encounters have led to the tragic loss of many Native languages; missionary encounters have also led, through the mechanisms and practices of literacy, to the retention of Native languages. Missionary encounters could eradicate traditions; they

could also provide material for new articulations of those traditions. The encounters could introduce or exacerbate divisions in Native communities and families, fomenting disastrous results, if not violence; through those encounters could also emerge novel social networks and institutions around which fragmented Native peoples could restore their communities. (McNally 289)

Recognizing the discriminatory practices of Christian churches that required their Native American followers to fully abandon their own religious traditions in order to become Christians, Ines Talamantez in her article “Seeing Red: American Indian Women Speaking about Their Religious and Political Perspectives” identifies several patterns of Native women’s reactions to the pressure put on them:

Some native women continue to resist completely all forms of Christianity and practice their own native ways, which beautifully blend culture and spirituality in one complete worldview. Other women continue to follow their cultural ways and have found a method that allows them to be Indians from a specific culture but yet accept and embrace Christian dogma. And of course some Indian women have accepted Christianity completely and have opted for assimilation into the dominant American culture. (223)

The second mode out of the abovementioned responses fits into the postcolonial paradigm, which does not simply operate with binary oppositions, like the first and the third modes apparently do, but rather undermines the cultural structures of colonialism by blending diverse practices. Similarly, emphasizing the mutuality of influence, Nicholas states that “missionaries and Native Americans together...reconciled out elements of Christianity with other forms of spirituality” (278). Analysis of the case of the Native American clergyman Samson Occom leads him to the conclusion that, as in the case of black preachers, “colonial discourses of emotional violence” stimulated Occom “to take what he had learned from missionaries to help other Natives use the Christian message in struggles for self-preservation and autonomy” (Nicholas 280).

In this process of syncretization, certain themes came to the fore. Maulana Karenga in the article “Black Religion: The African Model” identifies some of these. The use of intermediary deities, reverence to ancestors, and respect for nature were common to many African religious traditions despite their diversity. Those themes became the basis for an African American redefinition of Christianity. For example, Karenga states that “there is the belief in one Supreme God,” who, depending on the society, is presented as the “Father” or “Mother” (42). In some religions, however, it is endowed with both male and female characteristics. This Supreme Being is frequently made accessible for the daily interaction with people through divinities, “who are seen as God’s intermediaries and assistants” and “are both similar and from Jesus, angels, and Catholic saints as intermediaries and assistants” to the Christian deity (Karenga 43).

Native American indigenous religions are similar to African religious tradition in this respect. Paula Gunn Allen recounts one of the creation myths widespread among Native people, in which “the Grandmother(s)” is presented as the Creator of life: “Before the coming of the white man, or long ago, so far, as the people say, the Grandmother(s) created the firmament, the earth, and all the spirit beings in it” (200). Moreover, in Native societies women are often designated as “healers, dreamers, and shamans,” who fulfill the mediatory function between tribal people and the spirit world and perform “healings, hunting ceremonies, vision quests and the guidance for them, acts of psychokinesis, teleportation, weather direction, and more” (Gunn Allen 207).

Another feature of African and Native American religions manifested in syncretism is the reverence to ancestors. According to Karenga, there are several reasons for ancestor veneration in African religious tradition: “they are (1) a source and symbol

of lineage; (2) models of ethical life, service, and social achievement to the community; and (3) because they are spiritual intercessors between humans and the Creator” (Karenga 43). Such religious beliefs reinforce the connection between one’s personal identity and responsibility and one’s collective identity and duties as a member of a community. Elizabeth West writes that in traditional African societies an individual “does not face death alone, but rather is attended by members of the community to help in the crossing-over experience” (64). The existence of relatives, who can keep the memory of a dead person alive, enables him/her to live through them. Dead people are also believed to be “revived” in the spirit world as ancestors, which symbolizes their ability to conquer death. Deference to forefathers in Native communities is often concomitant with a fear of their enormous (sometimes even destructive) power over the living people.

Finally, a profound respect for nature is another characteristic of these religious hybrids. Such respect is not only basic to the Native religious tradition, but also forms the foundation of the American Indian perception of the world. The Native American worldview includes nature as an indispensable and inseparable part of human society and envisions peaceful human co-existence with it as an essential condition for survival: “In the beginning were the people, the spirits, the gods...There were the moon, the sun, the earth, the waters of earth and sky. There were the stars, the thunders, the mountains, the plains, the mesas and the hills” (Gunn Allen 194). A similar respect for nature exists in African religions:

The whole world as God’s creation is alive with His/Her symbols and gifts to humans, and bears witness to His/Her power, beauty, and beneficence. Thus, there are sacred trees, rivers, mountains, and animals...Nature is not only respected because of its associations with God, but also because of its relevance to humankind. This respect is grounded in the belief that there is an

*unbreakable bond between the divine, the human, and the natural
and that therefore damage to one is damage to the other and
likewise respect and care for one is respect and care for the other.
(Karenga 43)*

In the traditional African worldview, as well as in that of Native American communities, nature, God, and humanity are intricately connected. Unlike the God of Western Christianity, “who is the creator of all but an entity distinct from his creations,” the African God both creates everything and exists in everything, “and his salvation is thus granted to everyone” (West 61).

Celie’s “New” God: Hybridized Spirituality in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple

Turning now to the novels of Alice Walker and Louise Erdrich, we can see how these religious elements become the basis of a liberating postcolonial space. “Dear God,” is an appeal that Celie directs to the imaginary receiver of her confessional letters in the first part of the novel. Deprived of all close people in her life, she chooses the enigmatic figure of the Christian Deity to confide her personal sufferings to. Celie, however, is not conscious of the fact that that her image of God is the one imposed upon her by her oppressors. When she describes her addressee to her female friend and lover Shug, he turns out to be a tall bearded white man with big bluish-grey cool eyes, white lashes and white robes. In another instance, she envisions him as a “stout white man work at the bank,” surrounded by albino angels (Walker, *The Color Purple* 115). Thus, her description indicates “not only God’s race and gender, but also his authoritative status and economic power” and further underscores “the black woman’s status in this hierarchical relationship as inferior or, recalling Patricia Hunter, ‘something other’” (Whitted 100).

When Celie realizes the parallel between the white Christian God to whom she vainly appealed and white people, who “never listen to colored” or “If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 202) as well as her abusive husband, who for years has been concealing her sister’s letters from her, she “accuses God of willful neglect and abuse of power” and alienates herself from him. Celie’s deep disappointment and loss of faith is marked with the change of addressee. As she states at the beginning of one of the letters to her sister Nettie, “I don’t write to God no more, I write to you” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 199). She pours out her anger and indignation in the conversation with Shug by claiming that God did not do anything for her, except giving her “a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister...[she]...probably won’t ever see again” (*ibid.*). Celie completely rejects God since she ascertains that he is a man and acts just like all the other men she knows – “Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (*ibid.*).

Qiana Whitted interprets Celie’s behavior as an irreconcilable break with Christianity. She argues that “while Celie’s new understanding of God does not completely reject theism, it is not based in a Christian belief system” (Whitted 107). However, such a radical assumption might be too simplistic and exclusive. While Celie’s religious discourse is significantly transformed, this transformation does not necessarily mean a complete elimination of the Christian framework. Shug Avery is the one who propels Celie to reevaluate her vision of God, but not completely renounce it. She blames people for turning God and religion into a tool of power and control, using which they can elevate themselves and abase others:

...You have to get man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall...Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your

*box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost... Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 204)*

Shug rejects church as a social institution created by men in order to manipulate people by promising to give them God and prefers a more individualistic, intimate, and direct schema of interaction with God that does not need any institutional mediation: “She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 200-201).

The new religion that Shug offers to Celie is precisely what Charles Joyner calls a “unique and creative synthesis” of white people’s Christianity and African religious traditions. Shug encourages Celie to modify her vision of Christianity by embracing “a spiritual energy that is neither white nor male, and honors self-discovery, human passion, and a loving kinship with the earth” (Whitted 106). She proposes to complement it with the “profound respect for nature,” which has been mentioned before as one of the inherent features of the African religions. Shug confesses that she used to have the same imposed image of God as a white man, but she abandoned it because at some point she felt herself as a “part of everything, not separate at all” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 203). Her “new” God is not constraining and morally exclusive, for it “...love all them feelings,” so “You can just relax, go with everything that’s going and praise God by liking what you like” (*ibid.*). It also is not vain and does not require any sacrifices. Instead, it is just “wanting to share a good thing” and “always trying to please us back” by “making little surprises and springing them on us when us least expect” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 203-204). Unlike the Christian God, faith in whom forces Celie to neglect

her present life, for it “soon be over” and endure with a hope for heaven that “last all ways” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 44), Shug’s God advocates the joy of every moment of life and gets “pissed off” “if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 203).

In his article “’Preachin’ the Blues’: Bessie Smith’s Secular Religion and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” Thomas Marvin draws a parallel between Walker’s character Shug Avery and African American blues singer Bessie Smith. He contends that since “Underneath the borrowed English phrases, the blues sustains a fundamentally African world view” (Marvin 412) Shug, who is the blues “queen” in the novel, is presented as an intermediary linking the act of singing the blues and preaching, as well as connecting Celie’s purely Western view of Christianity with traditional African spirituality. As he formulates it, “Like Bessie Smith, she expresses African religious concepts in an African-American idiom that is a synthesis of such diverse influences as the blues and the sermon, the work song, the folk tale, and the spiritual, keeping alive the vital connection between the past, the present, and the future” (Marvin 419).

Under Shug’s influence Celie commences revising her own image of God. She realizes that it was dictated to her by the dominant patriarchal ideology and now she needs to “chase that old white man” out of her head in order to form her own, independent vision of God (Walker, *The Color Purple* 204). Celie is finally able to confess to herself that she “been so busy thinking about him” that she never “never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing” (*ibid.*).

Celie's integrated religious worldview is evinced in one of the culminating moments in the novel, when she makes a decision to finally abandon her oppressive husband and start a new, independent life. Falling into a trance or "spiritual possession," which Elizabeth West describes as "an act through which the subject...enters a different or new realm, one that can provide participants with a new way of seeing themselves and the world around them" (West 53), Celie aligns herself with the powers of nature, which, taking the form of a "dust devil," arise on the porch to protect her from her husband's abusive intentions. Imitating some kind of a religious ritual, Celie curses Mr. several times by repeating the invocation:

*Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble...Until you do right by me...everything you even dream about will fail...Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice...The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot...A dust devil flew up on the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything you do to me, already done to you. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 213)*

Again "function[ing] as an intermediary," Shug warns Mr. to "stop provoking Celie" (Marvin 417-418) and helps her to "come to [herself]" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 214).

Moreover, the experiences with Christianity of other characters in the novels also should not be neglected. Celie's sister Nettie as well as her children are saved by the family of Christian missionaries, with whom they travel to Africa. Thus, Nettie sees another side of the same religion, which is not oppressive or degrading to her, but saving and elevating. In one of her letters to Celie, Nettie praises God for his kindness to her and Celie's children as well as to her adopting family:

Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was. Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the

beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, 'God' sent them Olivia and Adam. I wanted to say, "God" has sent you their sister and aunt, but I didn't. Yes, their children, sent by 'God' are your children, Celie. And they are being brought up in love, Christian charity and awareness of God. And now 'God' has sent me to watch over them, to protect and cherish them. To lavish all love I feel for you on them. It is a miracle, isn't it? (Walker, The Color Purple 139)

However, Nettie's influence on Celie's religious worldview is also ambivalent. On the one hand, being a Christian missionary she advocates and worships the Christian God that Celie rejects. On the other hand, by sharing in the letters her African experience with her sister, Nettie brings Celie even closer to their ancestors' culture and religion, which contributes more to her hybrid type of religiosity. Citing one of Nettie's letters, Celie recounts to her husband the Olinka's version of the Adam and Eve story, in which Adam appears as the first white man, but not the first man:

...they know who Adam is from they own point of view. And for a whole lot longer time ago...They say everybody before Adam was black. Then one day some woman they just right away kill, come out with this colorless baby. They thought at first it was something she ate. But then another one had one and also the women start to have twins...So really Adam wasn't even the first white man. He was just the first one the people didn't kill. (Walker, The Color Purple 280)

By embracing her sister and her children at the end of the novel Celie symbolically embraces the Christian God who has been good and protective to them and brought them back to her. But at the same time she also absorbs the African cultural and religious traditions through sharing Nettie's experience in the land of their origin. The last chapter of the novel starts with Celie's appeal to the whole world, which contains everything including God: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 292), and ends with "Amen" which also points to the fact that Christianity was not excluded from her life. Thus, conflation of

the Christian God and the god of her African heritage whose being is manifested in nature demonstrates the spiritual duality Celie negotiates and reveals the form of religious syncretism she preaches.

“Tribal” Christianity: Postcolonial Religion in Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine and Tracks

In *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* Louise Erdrich depicts all three patterns of reaction to the imposition of Christianity on the Native community. However, a conflation of “Christian religion and Native American mythology,” or in Louis Owens words, “illumination of liminality,” seems to dominate (194-195). The beginnings of both novels are permeated with biblical references and allusions. In *Tracks*, for example, Father Damien is one of the first characters the reader is introduced to, which testifies to the expected importance of his role in the story. As Catherine Rainwater notices in her article “Reading between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich,” the opening scene of *Love Medicine* takes place on Easter weekend, when June Kashpaw undertakes her last homecoming travel (407). Her death at this time evokes associations with such Christian notions as resurrection and heaven. Moreover, some chapter titles (“The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” “Saint Marie,” “Resurrection,” “Flesh and Blood”) also provide direct allusions to the Bible and implicitly suggest that the story will unfold within “a Judeo-Christian value system” (*ibid.*). Despite this multiplicity of Christian allusions, the “encoded biblical material is juxtaposed with encoded data from the American Indian shamanic tradition” (*ibid.*).

The Catholic Church in Louise Erdrich’s novels is predominantly represented by two characters – Sister Leopolda (or Pauline) and Father Damien. Seemingly devoted

Christians, neither of them is fully devoid of certain influences of tribal spirituality. Pauline, despite all her strivings to devoutness, still operates within the system of references to Native religious beliefs. Father Damien, on the contrary, acquires some features of the tribal world.

Pauline is one of those Native women who, according to Talamantez's classification, are trying to accept Christianity completely. However, her fervent worshiping and acts of relentless self-crucifixion are not very fruitful, for her ill-natured behavior is incompatible with fundamental Christian principles. Louis Owens characterizes her as "the mad nun who tortures Marie Lazarre and struggles with Satan...the mother who abandoned and never acknowledged Marie, the Indian who denied her Indianness, the demented murderer of her daughter's father, and the Christian who never relinquished her belief in Missepeshu, the lake monster of Matchimanito" (204). The main reason why she gets tempted by Christianity, is because, as white people's religion, it can elevate her above the tribal people, for now, being "not one speck of Indian but wholly white" (Erdrich, *Tracks* 137), she obtains the power to disdainfully refer to the Native people as "others" by separating "them" (Indians) from "us" (white Christians). However, as Catherine Rainwater contends, Pauline "cannot quite escape her old way of constructing experience. Part of her notion of evil and the supernatural, for example, derives from a non-Christian frame of reference" (Rainwater 409). Thus, for instance, she travels with Fleur up the unknown road "along with other Indians" to a place which she calls "heaven of the Chippewa" (Erdrich, *Tracks* 159-160). Operating within "her amalgam of religious views" (Rainwater 409) she applies Christian terminology to phenomenon that does not exist in the Native world. Finally, she resolves

to fight the lake spirit, whom she mistakes for Satan, despite the fact they belong to the disparate belief systems.

Pauline's abandoned daughter Marie experiences physical and mental hardships in being a devout Christian due to the encounter with her mother. As a girl, she intends to become a nun, but changes her mind after the tortures Sister Leopolda, who turns out to be Pauline from *Tracks* and consequently Marie's mother, puts her through. Seemingly trying to drive the devil out of the girl's mind and body Sister Leopolda subjects her to various highly sophisticated tortures, aiming at breaking her will and transforming her into an obedient and subservient nun. During one of those exorcizing sessions Sister Leopolda pours boiling water from the kettle on Marie's back:

*I heard the water as it came, tipped from the spout, cooling as it fell but still scalding as it struck. I must have twitched beneath her foot, because she steadied me, and then the poker nudged up beside my arm as if to guide. 'To warm your cold ash heart,' she said. I felt how patient she would be. The water came. My mind went dead and blank. Again. I could only think the kettle would be cooling slowly in her hand. I could not stand it. I bit my lip so as not to satisfy her with a sound... 'I will boil him from your mind if you make a peep,' she said, 'by filling up your ear.' (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 53)*

Marie leaves the convent and finds her self-realization in the tribal community by becoming a wife and a mother. In the chapter "Flesh and Blood," the name of which speaks to Marie's and Sister Leopolda's kinship, Marie once again goes "up the hill" with her daughter Zelda to prove to Pauline that she managed to achieve something in her life. But the meeting ends with another vicious confrontation, a fight that makes Marie wish for Sister Leopolda's soon death. After "hating her all these years," Marie leaves the convent with the feeling of irreconcilable animosity towards her mother (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 158).

One of the biggest challenges that Christianity poses to the women in both novels is its incompatibility with motherhood. When Pauline “first felt the movement” of her child inside, she “tried to force it out..., to punish, to drive it from the womb” because she “had already betrothed herself to God” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 131). Later on, having left her daughter to another woman, Pauline tortures herself in the convent in order to receive “forgiveness” from God of her daughter and determines to forget her. Fourteen years later Sister Leopolda instructs her daughter Marie about her options in life: “You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 48). Marie’s oldest daughter Zelda as well cherishes the dream to become a nun, but on marrying an off-reservation man she is forced to give up the idea. Thus, she blames her daughter, Albertine, for her own downfall, which makes Albertine suffer and wish her mother had gone “up the nun’s hill to the convent, like she wanted,” instead of having her (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 10).

However, as in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* there is the other side of Christianity. While Pauline represents “every aspect of Catholicism taken to extremes,” Father Damien “redeems the church considerably” (Owens 204-205). He is presented as a “liminal figure,” standing for the missionaries who themselves, according to Nicholas, “were transitional individuals” (283). Father Damien as a character becomes an evidence to the fact that “the church on reservations has become more tolerant, and that there have been many committed priests who fought for Indian rights” (Alberts, qtd. in Owens 205). His devotion to the Native community is revealed from the first chapters of *Tracks*, when he steps in to “replace the priest who succumbed to the same devastation as his flock” in the middle of a rampant epidemic

(Erdrich, *Tracks* 2). Moreover, his arrival rescues Nanapush and Fleur from the deathly trance resulting from their interaction with the spirits of the dead. Finding them “Numb, stupid as bears in a winter den” Father Damien breaks the fatal dormancy with “a dazzling and painful light” flooding from the open door and delivers inspiring news about Fleur’s cousin Moses, who “was found alive in the woods” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 7). The priest also eagerly learns the “art of talking” from the old man Nanapush and when the time comes he uses all his acquired eloquence to persuade him to intervene into the tribal policy of the government by taking a leadership position. He not only bridges the two antagonistic societies by proving Native people with the information about governmental plans, but also financially contributes to the rescue of Indian allotments by adding “the final quarter from his own pocket” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 191).

In one way or another, all the characters in the novels wander “mentally between Indian and white worlds” (Owens 203). The choice of a religious belief system in which they operate is a foundational part of this world. Christianity appears to be enticing for the characters, like Pauline, who find themselves alienated from the Native community, for it grants them a feeling of empowerment, superiority, and belonging. However, they tend to display a disability to eradicate the remnants of the tribal spirituality completely. Others use the Church to strengthen their Native American identity. This leads to the postcolonial amalgam of religious views that Native Americans adopted and utilized as a means of resistance to “colonial discourses of emotional violence” and as a means of “rebuilding their interior selves in new ways” (Nicholas 280).

Describing the tribal community dwelling on the shore of the lake Matchimanito, Pauline says that “They formed a kind of clan, the new made up of bits of the old, some

religions in the old ways and some in the new” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 70). Despite being a conventional tribal woman, who does not renounce the existence of the spirit world and resorts to traditional healing methods, Eli’s mother Margaret regularly attends Mass “Along with any of the household she could drag” (*ibid.*) In addition, she “tied Lulu against her chest in an old shawl and made the child sit through Benediction, right up front where incense smoke would touch her skin, as though she needed purifying” (*ibid.*). Functioning simultaneously within two disparate religious and cultural traditions Margaret finds empowerment and support, on the one hand, from her tribal affiliation, while on the other hand, enjoying the advantages of sharing the white society’s values.

In *Love Medicine* June’s illegitimate son Lipsha Morrissey faces the same dilemma that Celie is struggling with – the deafness of the Christian God. Finding “something very calming about the cool greenish inside of ...[the]...mission” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 235) he frequently visits Holy Mass. However, his Grandfather strips off his delusions by hollering and yelling the prayers, while other people only “muttered theirs” (*ibid.*). The old man explains his impudent behavior stating: “God don’t hear me otherwise” (*ibid.*). This propels Lipsha to ponder about the difference between the God he knows from the Bible and the one he addresses his prayers to:

*Since the Old Testament, God’s been deafening up on us. I read, see. Besides the dictionary, which I’m constantly in use of, I had this Bible once. I read it. I found there was discrepancies between then and now. It struck me. Here God used to raineth bread from clouds, smite the Phillipines...He even appeared in person every once in a while. God used to pay attention, is what I’m saying. (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 236)*

He also compares Christian God to the tribal gods that “aren’t perfect...but at least they come around. They’ll do a favor if you ask them right. You don’t have to yell” (*ibid.*).

Moreover, similar to Celie's parallel between God and a white man, Lipsha links "a God whose ears...[are]...stopped" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 237) to the government and thus doubts his reliability. Nevertheless, Lipsha continues to function within both religious traditions. Striving to help his Grandpa and Grandma Kashpaw "get back some happiness within the tail ends of their lives" (*ibid.*), he gives in to his grandmother's pleas and concocts a "love medicine," which he then takes "to get blessed up at the mission" (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 246).

Christianity, though originally imposed on the Native American and African American communities as a tool of colonization and subjugation, is neither fully and uncritically adopted, not completely repudiated by them. Instead, both societies reinterpret the elements of Christianity in terms of their own traditional religious beliefs and produce a "unique and creative synthesis of both" (Joyner 37). By inscribing their African or Native worldviews into the Christian framework they form a new hybridized religion characteristic of postcolonial societies.

In their novels, both Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker depict characters who in one way or another mentally wander between the two worlds. In Erdrich's *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*, no matter what religious choice they make, the characters are not devoid of certain influences of the other form of spirituality. In the process of her personal transformation, Walker's heroine quite consciously revisits the image of the Christian God that she has inherited, endowing it with elements of traditional African spirituality thus creating a new, inclusive form of African American religion.

Chapter 3: “Who is Your Mother?”: Native American and African American

Experiences of Motherhood

Postcolonial Subversion of White Family Structures

The theme of motherhood and mother/child relationships is another field in which the novels of Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker explore a postcolonial sensibility. Historically, since non-white women (in this case specifically Native American and African American) as mothers have been forced to bear “devastating losses incurred through colonialism,” which makes their plight “significantly different from the situation of mothers who have not suffered a similar fate” (Reynolds 176). Thus, while in the theme of religion postcoloniality of African American and Native American cultures is manifested in the form of hybridity, in the theme of motherhood it reveals itself in the form of subversion. Despite the fact that both African American and Native American communities have been exposed to and thus influenced by white familial patterns, they nevertheless managed to retain certain elements of their cultural heritage. While their traditional customs, values, and religious beliefs, were subjected to vehement and extensive eradication processes from the side of the colonizing power, family structures and traditional family roles proved much more difficult to penetrate and alter.

In her article “Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society” Gloria Joseph emphasizes the stability and importance of the notion of motherhood for black families. She states that in comparison with other immigrant

communities, "...the traditional role of mother was preserved with less conflict among Blacks due to the circumstances surrounding their lives in America. The family had to depend more on family members and roles which were preserved partially due to the enforced segregation, isolation, and insularity of Black families" (Joseph 89). Thus, she contends that "the Black family in concert developed and established new roles, combining the requisites of the new society with all that could be maintained from the old" (Joseph 90). The signs of this Afrocentric ideology of motherhood she uncovers, for example, in traditions surrounding the Mother's Day celebration. Despite the fact that the holiday is a nationwide phenomenon and is not limited to black families, "the style and manner of celebration for Blacks has cultural differences and the role of honor and respect for the Black mother has its roots in African history" (Joseph 87).

A similar dynamic can be observed in Native American familial structures, in which mothers develop strong bonds with other members of the family, especially their daughters. Hertha Wong notices a disparate dynamic in Euroamerican and Native American mother-daughter relationships: "... while Euroamerican women tend to write about struggles of will and identity between mother and daughter, Native American women seem to focus on harmonious relations between and among female family members" (176). According to Patricia Clark Smith, the relationships between Anglo mother and daughter resemble those of strangers – "unreachable, unknowable, and threatening to her identity" (Smith, qtd. in Wong 176), which drastically contradicts the model of Native American family connections, especially the bond between mothers and daughters. Finally, Elaine Tuttle Hansen warns against the assumption that "Native American mothers feel the need to be relieved of either the burdens of child care or the

dominant myth of motherhood in order to develop the kind of autonomous selfhood or freedom from the oppressions of femininity that mainstream Euroamerican culture – along with many of its feminist critics - valorizes” (117). On the contrary, for indigenous women, as further analysis will reveal, the acquisition of personal freedom and the recuperation of national identity and tribal wholeness are inextricably connected to the “burden” of motherhood.

Patricia Hill Collins in her article “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships” identifies major conditions that are “implicit in white perspectives on motherhood,” forming the foundation for the cult of true womanhood, but are “particularly problematic” for African American and Native American women, as well as other women of color. She states that although “the idea of the cult of true womanhood has been held up to Black women for emulation,” racial oppression deprived black families of sufficient resources to support “private, nuclear family households” (Collins 326). Moreover, due to the same reason, black women were unable to conform to the white middle class standard of strict sex-role segregation, according to which to be considered a ‘good’ mother, one was supposed to stay at home, “making motherhood a full-time ‘occupation’” (Collins 327), while developing a complete economic dependency on men. Both of those conditions are equally uncharacteristic for African American and Native American families.

Both African American and Native American scholars point to the irrelevance of the Western notion of the “nuclear family household” in regard to black and American Indian family structures. According to Paula Gunn Allen, the major difference between the Western type nuclear family and the Native American tribal kinship system lies in the

fact that for the latter blood relation does not play a decisive role. Because the “relationship to the Spirit world” is of primary importance for the Native people, “Spirit-related persons are perceived as more closely linked than blood-related persons” (Gunn Allen 247). Objecting to the application of the word “household” to the Native tribal kinship system, Gunn Allen supports her argument stating that “a tribal ‘household’ includes a number of individuals who are clan rather than blood relatives.” She explains that:

For non-tribal people, “household” typically means a unit composed of a father, mother, and offspring...A tribal household might encompass assorted blood-kin, medicine society “kin,” adoptees, servants, and visitors who have a clan or supernatural claim on membership although they are biologically unrelated to the rest of the household. (Gunn Allen 248)

Empowering Role of Native American Motherhood

In both Louise Erdrich’s novels the theme of motherhood is bound up with such communal affiliations, since they form the basis of Native American life. At the beginning of his narration in *Tracks*, the old tribal man Nanapush attempts to pass the sense of communal value on to his granddaughter Lulu by equating his personal history with that of the whole tribe: “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1). But after all the ordeals they are forced to endure – “the spotted sickness from the south...long fight west to Nadouissioux land...and a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers” – his communal identity is shattered and he starts speaking only for himself: “I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the governmental treaty, and refused to sign the settlement

papers...I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager” (Erdrich, *Tracks* 1-2).

Despite the fact that his “own family was wiped out one by one, leaving only Nanapush,” he manages to restore the community around him by creating spiritual bonds with people who are of no kinship to him (Erdrich, *Tracks* 2). Once he saves Fleur from imminent death, father/daughter relationships are established between them. Through her, he also draws closer to Eli Kashpaw and his mother Margaret (Rushes Bear), who will later become his partner. Nanapush also acquires a granddaughter – Lulu – despite the fact that he has no children. All of them dwelling together in Fleur’s house on the lake Matchimanito evoke an image of the Western-type nuclear family, but they are not biologically kin to each other.

Like *Tracks*, *Love Medicine* affirms “traits and values of the tribal kinship system” (Rainwater 418), nevertheless, incorporating certain elements of the nuclear family. Although the novel opens with a nuclear family gathering, where almost all the participants seem to be related by “blood,” the meeting revolves around “aliens” – the boy Lipsha and his deceased mother June. Catherine Rainwater states that one of the ways in which Erdrich encodes the norms and values of the tribal kinship system is in her denial of “the significance of biological lineage” (Rainwater 419). She contends that despite the fact that

Values associated with the Western nuclear family are evoked by the text, especially in the arguments that occur concerning the ‘real’ status of Marie Kashpaw’s biological children, as opposed to the outcast status of adoptees such as June (actually Marie’s niece) and Lipsha (June’s son). The idea that biological children who belong in a nuclear family is a Western-European, not a Native American, concept. (Rainwater 418)

Indeed, Paula Gunn Allen notes that “in many tribes childbearing meant empowerment” (251), regardless of the fact whether the children were one’s own or adopted. Marie, for example, is presented as a loving and hardworking Native mother. While Lulu raises only her own children, Marie is “both biological and adoptive mother” (Wong 181), for out of sympathy she takes in several orphans regardless of the fact that she can barely feed her own family. Moreover, Marie’s personal attachment to her adopted children is much stronger than to her own. In addition, she mothers her unfaithful husband and his troublesome elderly mother Rushes Bear, who would “throw pots around and smack the walls with a stick of wood” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 98). Finally, at the end of her life after Nector’s death she manages to overcome the hostility towards Lulu, who was his long-time lover, and takes care even of her, when Lulu becomes almost completely blind.

Lulu’s family presents another subversion of the Western nuclear family model. Unlike Marie, she does not take in anyone else’s children, however her own are considered “illegitimate” according to the Western standard. However, as Paula Gunn Allen explains, “Even among contemporary American Indians, a male who is identified as the husband of the lady of the house may not be (and often is not) the father of her children” (249). Lulu fully uses the sexual freedom allotted to the women in Native societies, for “all of her sons were from different fathers” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 137). Thus, when one of her few legitimate husbands - Henry Lamartine - dies, she confesses that neither of her eight sons is actually his.

Both Marie and Lulu feel personally and socially empowered through their children and families. Although receiving her social status by marrying Nector, Marie

asserts herself as a full member of the Native community. She stimulates her husband to become tribal chairman and devotes her life to raising her own and adopted children. But her dedication to the family and community does not deprive her of power and autonomy. When Nector decides to abandon her for Lulu, she still proves to be unbreakable and resistant to sorrow: “But I would not care if Marie Kashpaw had to wear an old shroud. I would not care if Lulu Lamartine ended up the wife of the chairman of the Chippewa Tribe. I’d still be Marie. Marie. Star of the Sea. I’d shine when they stripped off the wax!” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 165) Lulu’s social status comes from her being a daughter of Fleur Pillager, which is why she does not need to validate her position in the tribal community. However, like her mother, she is very independent and follows only her own ways. The source of her power comes from her inner harmony and her all-embracing love to the whole world: “I loved what I saw. And yes, it is true that I’ve done all the things they say. That’s not what gets them. What aggravates them is I’ve never shed one solitary tear. I’m not sorry. That’s unnatural. As we all know, a woman is supposed to cry” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 277).

“Othermothers” : African American Practices of Communal Motherhood

Following the West-African sociologist Christine Opong, Patricia Hill Collins also argues against the application of “the Western notion of equating household with family” (328) to the West African societies, for it distorts the traditional family roles in African cultures. Inheriting and preserving the traditional African familial structures, African American communities developed “women-centered networks of community-based childcare” (Collins 329), which, similar to Native American societies, “...extend

beyond the boundaries of biologically related extended families” (*ibid.*). Patricia Collins explains that:

In African-American communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. Biological mothers or blood-mothers are expected to care for their children: But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result ‘othermothers,’ women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (ibid.)

Thus, like the Native American pattern of childcare represented in *Love Medicine* by Marie, the existence of the ‘othermother’ role within black communities subverts the Western standard of the nuclear family. Children deprived of or abandoned by their blood-mothers are still supported by the community through othermothers, who take in additional children, even if they have enough of their own.

Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* provides multiple examples of this “unconventional” mothering. Like Louise Erdrich, she incorporates the elements and evokes associations with the Western type nuclear family, but at the same time disregards the principle of biological kinship fundamental to Western family structures. The novel opens with the oppressive and deviant sexual connection between Celie and her father. Unable to force her mother to sexual intercourse while she is still unwell after the birth of another child, he approaches Celie saying “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t” and warning her “not never tell nobody but God” or “It’d kill your mammy” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 1). Although later in the novel Celie ascertains the fact that he is not her biological father, which removes the stigma of father-daughter incest from the sexual

abuse he performs on her, she, as well as her children, is significantly affected by the physical and psychological repercussions of this act of violence.

Celie later becomes a stepmother to the children of a man a marriage with whom is imposed on her by her stepfather whom she always calls “Mr,” since she does not know his real name. While the man marries Celie in order to acquire a woman to nurture his offspring, they, having just lost their biological mother, are defiant and hostile towards her:

*I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't do that! But that's all he say. He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The girls hair ain't been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I'll just have to shave it off...So after I bandage my head best I can and cook dinner...I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They cuse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 13)*

Nevertheless, Celie not only manages to establish friendly relationships with Mr's children gradually, but also enjoys their confidence. The oldest boy Harpo calls her “Miss Celie” and comes to get her advice when he has troubles with his wife Sofia. Moreover, Celie condones and even accepts Mr's lover Shug, who is despised and rejected by everyone else: “Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp. A woman at church say she dying – maybe two berkulosis or some kind of nasty woman disease” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 45). Having nursed Shug during her sickness, Celie eventually becomes involved in a more intimate relationship with her, which contributes to her development as an independent and self-sufficient woman. Thus, Celie, her husband Albert (Mr.), Shug and her new husband Grandy, Harpo, his wife Sofia and his

lover Squeak, Sofia's sister Odessa, who raises her children while Sofia serves her term in prison and then at the mayor's house, comprise a large extended family, whose relations are only partially based on biological kinship.

Celie's children, alienated from their biological mother, are adopted by a Christian missionaries' family, who themselves are not able to have babies. Furthermore, they also take in Celie's sister Nettie, first sexually harassed and later turned out of their house by her husband. Nettie becomes one of those "Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins," who, according to Patricia Collins, "acted as othermothers by taking on childcare responsibilities for each other's children" (329). Samuel, the father of the adoptive family, even erroneously mistakes her for their mother and believes for some time that she "...showed up at their house...following...[her] children" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 180). Despite the fact that Samuel and Corrine take Nettie in to look after the children and work for them, she feels herself like a member of the family, not like a maid, for they teach her, and she teaches the children "and there's no beginning or end to teaching and learning and working – it all runs together" (Walker, *The Color Purple* 140).

The novel ends with a big family reunion during which Celie finally meets her grown children and introduces them and her sister to the people who have become her "kin" while they were separated:

*After while, she say Celie. I say Nettie. Little bit more time pass. Us look round at a lot of peoples knees. Nettie never let go my waist. This my husband Samuel, she say, pointing up. These our children Olivia and Adam and this Adam's wife Tashi, she say. I point up at my peoples. This Shug and Albert, I say. Everybody say Pleased to Meetcha. Then Shug and Albert start to hug everybody one after the other. Me and Nettie finally git up off the porch and I hug my children. And I hug Tashi. Then I hug Samuel. (Walker, *The Color Purple* 294)*

As the quote reveals, Nettie, despite lacking the authority of the biological mother, identifies Tashi and Adam as her children. Celie, at the same time, realizes her sister's role in the lives of her biological children and does not object to sharing her title of the "mother" with a person who brought them up and granted her a chance to see them again.

*Multifaceted Nature of Motherhood in Native American and African American
Communities*

The rigid sex role division characteristic of the white, middle-class nuclear family, where mothers are responsible for nurturing and caring, while fathers provide economically is also irrelevant for Native American and African American communities. Rather, "mothering" is equated with "parenting" in general and thus is not regarded as a mere complement of fatherhood. The fact of being a "mother" limits neither black nor Native women from social and professional activities. On the contrary, responsibility for the family in the conditions of severe economic deprivation propels them to diverge from the Western ideal of "stay at home" mother, cultivated and cherished as an indispensable constituent of the cult of true womanhood.

Moreover, in both societies the notion of motherhood is attached to cultural continuity. In Native communities the mother is perceived not just as "a woman who bore a child," but as a carrier of a tradition "whose continuance signals part of a cyclical way of life" (Reynolds 179-180). In her article "Mother Times Two: A Double Take on a Gynocentric Justice Song" Margot R. Reynolds argues that

The term 'mother' or 'grandmother' in many Native American tribes signifies a wise woman who is committed to wholeness and well-being. This kind of commitment can manifest itself in multiple ways – from gardening to childbearing to mentoring. (177)

Moreover, as Reynolds accentuates, the continuance of tradition has an especially strong and essential role in mother/daughter relationships, which evinces Native American women's firm opposition to both colonialism and patriarchy.

Unlike in the Euroamerican patriarchal worldview, where a person's identity and place in the society is attached to the figure of the father, the survival and continuity of the Native American cultural tradition is secured by the figure of the mother. As Paula Gunn Allen states, "your mother's identity is the key to your own identity....naming your mother (or her equivalent) enables people to place you precisely within the universal web of your life, in each of its dimensions: cultural, spiritual, personal, and historical," while "Failure to know your mother ... is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost – isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life" (209-210).

Louise Erdrich in her novels conveys this matrilineal dynamic, inherent to traditional Native societies, by diminishing male paternal roles and instead emphasizing the importance of "knowing one's mother." Although children in both novels are endowed with their fathers' names, Erdrich implies a sheer conventionality and randomness of the act of naming, for in the community they are identified in relation to their mothers. Thus, in *Tracks*, for example, the origin of Fleur's daughter Lulu is obscured: she could have been conceived as a result of her mother's rape by white men in Argus, or she might be a daughter of Eli Kashpaw, who fell in love with Fleur after her return from the city, and finally the lake spirit Misshepeshu may be regarded as her father as well. However, when Father Damien, conducting the ritual of baptism, inquires about her father's name to "complete the records," an old man Nanapush chooses to give the

girl his name (Erdrich, *Tracks* 61). Never knowing her father, Lulu is not really interested in him, whereas her break from her mother Fleur causes her tremendous sufferings. In *Love Medicine* Nanapush once again becomes a “father,” this time to Lulu’s children despite the fact that everybody is aware of the origin of their biological fathers. Being born from different men, all those boys are identified and associated only with their mother – Lulu. In the chapter called “Lulu’s Boys” the strong connection between Lulu and her sons becomes especially explicit: “Lulu managed to make the youngest boys obey perfectly...while the older ones adored her to the point that they did not tolerate anything less from anyone else” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 118). Finally, Lipsha Morrissey, whose name also comes not from his biological father, finds himself “on the verge of knowing who he was” (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 337), when he ascertains the name of his real mother – June Kashpaw. Despite the fact that Lulu Lamartine divulges Lipsha’s father as well, the young man does not seem to take too much interest in him, but seeks reconciliation with his mother.

Despite the presence of a strong mother/child bond in the majority of Erdrich’s novels, Hertha Wong argues for the centrality of “strained mothering relationships” in them (176). Pointing to the fact that “Erdrich’s novels are filled with orphans, thrown-away children, adoptive mothers, and quests for or denials of one’s mother” (Wong 180), she suggests that “these novels represent the realistic plight of the Native American women, unable to sustain bonds or protect and nurture their children, after conquest and defeat of the culture” (Hansen 121). This phenomenon of “mothers without child,” as Elaine Hansen names it, according to Wong “reflects the cultural alienation of the entire Native American community” (Hansen 121). Hansen, on the other hand, dissents from

Wong's conclusion and proposes a reconsideration of the "commonplace cultural and psychic story of the Indian mother who voluntarily or involuntarily abandons her child" (130).

The two arguments are not necessarily mutually exclusive once applied to separate novels. Although belonging to the same cycle of North Dakota novels and sharing the landscape and partially the community of characters, two novels seem to present different perspectives on the Native American society. Published four years after *Love Medicine*, but chronologically preceding it, the novel *Tracks* seems to be more permeated with the destructive repercussions of the Euroamerican conquest, which leaves an essential imprint on the mother/child relationships. Mothers in the novel are "without children" because they relinquish them once they themselves become victims of the white colonial enterprise. *Love Medicine*, on the contrary, "reaffirms the presence of the strong, enduring, and nurturing" mothers, who are able to find the ways to resist an ongoing process of colonization and thus secure physical and cultural survival of the tribe (Hansen 131). Although Hertha Wong correctly points to the "strained mothering relationships" of June, who abandons her two sons, as well as Albertine, who cannot find reconciliation with her mother Zelda, the novel revolves around the present and loving maternal characters, such as Lulu and Marie.

Remarkably, Lulu, Fleur's abandoned daughter from *Tracks*, never loses the connection to her mother

I missed the old language in my mother's mouth. Sometimes, I heard her. N'dawnis, n'dawnis. My daughter, she consoled me. Her voice came from all directions, mysteriously keeping me from inner harm. Her voice was the steady flame. (Erdrich, Love Medicine 68-69)

Lulu resembles her mother in many ways. She is an independent, free-spirited, strong woman, who also possesses “seductive sexual power” and thus experiences no inconveniences in having no permanent husband. As Elaine Hansen aptly notes, “Her behavior suggests that the creative order of Native American motherhood... has little to do with the social order controlled by Euroamerican institution of marriage and dominant notions of licit female sexuality or chastity” (132). However, Lulu turns out to be more resistant than her mother to the attempts of the government and the Indians cooperating with it to evict her and her children from their family land. Despite the fact that her house burns down, Lulu refuses point-blank to move:

*“No,” I said. “I’m going to live here.” And I did live on the very spot where the house had stood. For two months we camped there in a shack made out of bent sheets of tin siding, busted boards, burnt wood. We hauled water in cans. The summer was dry and hot...But we lived there like a pack of wild animals, and after a while it became a disgrace even to those who did not know the meaning of disgrace. The tribe finally built a crackerbox government house for us...That land was better than Henry’s, even, with a view overlooking town. From there I could see everything. I accepted their restitution. (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 287-288)*

Simultaneously resembling and deviating from her mother, Lulu manages to keep her family together and fulfill her motherly role for her children. She embodies the image of a traditional, loving and caring Native mother, for whom every child is her own beloved and cherished work of art. Thus, while trying to convince her son to use Native people’s natural artistic talents, she discards his statements about her artistic inability because she cannot draw by stating that “There’s lots of arts besides the pictorial” and motherhood is one of them (Erdrich, *Love Medicine* 304-305).

Similarly, in the African American cultural tradition the notion of motherhood is not confined to the functions of childbearing and childcare. On the contrary, black women have successfully integrated their activities as economic providers into their mothering responsibilities. Referring to the West African tradition, Patricia Collins emphasizes the multifaceted nature of motherhood in African societies as opposed to its one-sided perception in Western cultures. She contends,

Mothering was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men. Instead, for African women, emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival were interwoven as interdependent, complementary dimensions of motherhood. (Collins 328)

Unlike in the cult of true womanhood, “where work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood,” in African American societies “work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood” (Collins 330). Although being significantly disrupted by the institution of slavery, West African family patterns still remained quite strong in African American communities, for the gender ideologies and practices of slave owners, which black people were exposed to, were almost impossible to implement. Hence, the separation of the domains of providing and nurturing did not establish itself within African American families. Regardless of the type of work, whether in Southern agriculture or Northern/Southern domestic field, and their personal desire, “the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female ‘occupation’” (Collins 331).

Similarly, at the end of Alice Walker’s novel, Celie leaves her abusive husband and encouraged by Shug finds her passion in making pants, which also allows her to

support herself financially: “Let’s us put a few advertisements in the paper...And let’s us raise your prices a hefty notch...You making your living, Celie, she say. Girl, you on your way” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 221). Thus, only after establishing herself as a self-sufficient woman Celie is ready to reunite with her already grown up children. As she writes in one of the letters to her sister: “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children” (Walker, *The Color Purple* 222). Despite the fact that she feels that her children consider her “real old” and not knowing “much what going on,” Celie herself does not feel old at all (Walker, *The Color Purple* 295). On the contrary, having become an independent and self-sufficient person, she feels happy and “the youngest [she] ever felt” (*ibid.*).

In novels by both authors, the colonial enterprise intervenes in and disrupts both Native American and African American traditional mother/child relationships by taking children away from their mothers or forcing mothers to abandon their children. Exposed to the white familial structures and values, Native and black families manage to retain and maintain their cultural heritage by subversion of the Western family standards through adherence to and preservation of their traditional family organizations and gender roles. Both Louise Erdrich in *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* display a transition from colonial to postcolonial condition of motherhood in two communities. While in *Tracks* Erdrich portrays what Hertha Wong calls “strained mothering relationships” (176), for two main female characters both abandon their children under the pressure of certain social and political circumstances, caused by the intrusion of the colonial power into the Native societies; in *Love Medicine* she strives to depict the restoration of the tribal ways by reaffirming the presence of the loving and

caring traditional mothers, who are able to resist colonial domination and secure physical and cultural survival of their families. Alice Walker presents a similar dynamic within the limits of one novel. In *The Color Purple*, Celie, the mother heroine, undergoes the transformational process: from severe gender oppression to liberation. In both cases, the novels subvert the white middle-class ideal of motherhood, replacing it with a vision of the mother as a force in the community.

Conclusion

In their writings, Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker develop the postcolonial features of Native American and African American cultures. Despite the fact that both cultures have been excluded from the postcolonial discourse because their experiences of postcoloniality significantly diverge from those of traditionally colonized nations, their shared history of extensive and traumatic resistance to the legacies of colonial domination and shared aspiration to rediscover their traditional cultural practices and values should not be neglected. In both Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the common themes of religion and motherhood exemplify the shared strategies of hybridization and subversion used by those subjugated nations to resist the policy of cultural assimilation and absorption from the side of the colonizing power.

Under the guise of the seemingly benevolent goals of education and civilization, Christianity, whether in the form of Catholicism or Protestantism, was utilized as a tool of cultural colonization. Vigorously imposed upon Native American and African American people with an attempt to eliminate their traditional lifeways and replace them with the culture of the colonizer, Christianity was, nevertheless, only partially adopted by colonial black and Native people. Predominantly, the imposed white religious tradition was reinterpreted under the considerable influences of traditional spirituality. Moreover, the results of the encounters between Christian and indigenous religious traditions were

mutual, not one-sided. All this contributed to the formation of new hybridized forms of religion that included elements of both white and indigenous religious traditions.

The theme of religious syncretism is represented in the works of Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker. In *Tracks* and *Love Medicine* Erdrich exemplifies it by revealing the inability of the characters to stay within a single spiritual framework. Even those of them who strive to commit themselves to either Christianity or the indigenous religions are not able to completely exclude impacts of the other. The characters in Alice Walker's novel display the transition from colonial to postcolonial form of spirituality by complementing their images of the Christian God with the elements of traditional African religious traditions.

In the theme of motherhood, postcoloniality manifests itself in the form of subversion of the Western standard of familial structures and fixed gender roles. Due to the economic privations, African American and Native American communities were unable to support the private, nuclear family households held up to them as a model for emulation. Moreover, black and Native women were unable to conform to the white middle class standard of strict sex-role segregation, according to which to be considered a 'good' mother, one was supposed to stay at home, "making motherhood a full-time 'occupation'" (Collins 327), while developing a complete economic dependency on men. Thus, African American and Native American communities subverted those Western family standards by resorting to their traditional familial structures and gender roles. Affected by detrimental repercussions of colonial enterprise, mother/child relationships in the novels move from tension and alienation to reconciliation and reunion. Thus, the figure of the "mother without a child" (Hansen 121) present in *Tracks* and the first part of

The Color Purple is replaced by the strong, enduring, and nurturing mother in *Love Medicine* and the second part of Walker's novel.

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