

THE AUTHORITARIAN MOTHER VERSUS THE MATERNAL AUTHORITY

Reading A Native American Author as Nonviolent Peace Activism Via Maternal Criticism

ABSTRACT

Title: The Authoritarian Mother Versus The Maternal Authority: Reading A Native American Author as Nonviolent Peace Activism Via Maternal Criticism

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Thesis: The authority of the maternal lies in its ability to see the other and to see their unique value. The primary focus is on people, not systems or dogma. People—bodies—are the focus of maternal critics, because they call out the violence and zero in on those physical bodies and their care.

This analysis proves that works by Louise Erdrich, profound Native American woman author, can be read through a Maternal Critical lens, thereby making distinctions between the maternal authority within the novels' communities and that of the authoritarian structures present. My argument is that Maternal Critical analysis is fluid and can be applied in different ways to separate texts, and even to different characters within those texts. The maternal authority seeks to nurture, preserve, and respect the conscience of characters—flesh and blood actors. Their care is of the utmost importance, rather than power, control, or dogma. A maternal critical reading of *Love Medicine* underpins the responsibility of all characters to seek horizontal relations, rather than pushing upward into the already existing vertical hierarchies.

The Authoritarian Mother Versus Maternal Authority

Maternal Critical theory is a way of viewing texts, and I would argue the world, through an “unconventional” lens. This lens allows readers, and observers, to “recognize the fallacy of systems that associate vulnerability with shame and valorize a wish for power. A Maternal Critical approach reveals maternal characters who recognize vulnerability and respond” (Ingwerson 2). Ingwerson argues for readers to preserve the “‘connective strand’ between vulnerable readers and characters and the communities from which both have emerged, inclusion that resists violence and premises peacemaking” (2).

That “connective strand” is important. Because authoritarian systems, such as the patriarchal society in which we currently live, advocate for a vertical, hierarchical structure—one in which “some must be exploited to underwrite the privilege of others—this is violence”. These types of systems cannot survive without the violence they create. They “seek to control others, denying others their own agency” (Ingwerson 3). By building upon the backs of the ‘others,’ authoritarian structures have assembled a system that cannot survive without inherent violence. In other words, these vertical types of systems require a lot of force to maintain.

The difference with Maternal Criticism, and the Maternal Authority which it recognizes, is that it forms or underpins horizontal connections. These types of communities “recognize imbalances of power and value difference” (3). They support from below, fostering equilibrium among the community. The authority of the maternal lies in its ability to see the other and to see their unique value. The primary focus is on people, not systems or dogma. People—bodies—are the focus of maternal critics, because they call out the violence and zero in on those physical bodies and their care.

The primary vocabulary of maternal criticism is this: preserving, nurturing, and respecting conscience, terms that define the three essential goals of mothering, according to philosopher Sara Ruddick, and underpin practices that resist violence. By calling this critical approach “maternal,” Ingwerson calls attention to the authority of mothering, arguing that “both men and women may participate in building maternal communities” (3). In other words, “when a person responds to another out of a recognition of shared vulnerability, one is acting with authority, and resisting systems that exploit vulnerability” (Derived 3).

1. How Maternal Critical analysis works

In order to utilize a Maternal Critical approach, we must understand how it works. There are three major distinctions within the discipline, and each are important to understanding the concept.

The first distinction of Maternal Criticism is: the goal of a reciprocal encounter, that is, to both see the world as the ‘other’ sees it (to paraphrase philosopher Martha Nussbaum in *Not for Profit* 36) and to see one’s self realistically, as a member of this vulnerable human tribe.

The second distinction of Maternal Criticism is this: recognizing resistance in vulnerability locates maternal authority. Of course, authoritarians, too, can recognize vulnerability and use that recognition in sadistic ways; but, when vulnerability is defined as making demands for preservation, nurture, and respect, Maternal Critical readers can see what authoritarians always miscalculate: resistance.

Recognizing that the maternal self is a connected self is the third distinctive attribute of this approach. Recognizing maternal authority in others is a premise for discourses that build community. (Ingwerson, Charlyn. “Drury,” slide 3).

Another way to imagine the difference in maternal authority and that of authoritarianism is to view maternal authority as “the horizontal design of peace as inclusive narrative discourses,” versus “the vertical authoritarian model of peace as policy, negotiated by a few and imposed on the rest” (Ingwerson 49). The horizontal model has become a standard through which we can see the maternal authority at work.

I believe, as Ingwerson said, that recognizing maternal authority in others is a premise for discourse that builds community. This, specifically, undermines authoritarianism—the predominant model of our world. The analysis herein seeks to uphold that belief.

2. Louise Erdrich

With this analysis, I am focusing on the work of prolific Native American author Louise Erdrich, specifically *Love Medicine*. Her primary literary focus is on Ojibwe/Chippewa culture, communities, and traditions. She often delves into the extraordinary, as well as magical realism. Erdrich works with these fantastical elements in order to focus her lens deeper into Ojibwe/Chippewa culture. Erdrich has won many awards, including the U.S. Library of Congress prize for American Fiction in 2015, and she continues to write works that refuse to fit the mold of most western texts.

Love Medicine follows several families and their interconnections, and “in a broader sense ‘love medicine’ refers to the different kinds of spiritual power that enables Erdrich’s Native American and mixedblood [*sic*] characters to transcend—however momentarily—the

grim circumstances of their lives” (Mambrol). These characters have a long history of pain and they often hold their generational history within themselves as well—something that can be addressed by double consciousness. Regardless of how they have been forced into specific roles within the community and their lives, these different characters position themselves outside of how they’ve been cast to enrich, and sometimes to profit, within those communities. I narrowed in on *Love Medicine* primarily for this complex network of social interactions.

Secondly, I chose Erdrich to illustrate that “women’s stories are essential to rebuilding just and peaceful societies” (Ingwerson 49). The narratives of women who experience violence in conflict (regardless of where that conflict is) “locate both the experience of vulnerability and the authority of care,” and are therefore able to build along horizontal lines, rather than creating a vertical hierarchy (Ingwerson 49). These peace-makers construct “an inclusive narrative where the story of vulnerability is the profound human equalizer ... vulnerability is every person’s story” (Ingwerson 50).

And lastly, Erdrich gives readers a chance to utilize “invitation rhetoric”. This form of discourse is “designed to generate understanding among individuals with different perspectives” (“Invitational Rhetoric” 569). Erdrich’s work give readers a unique opportunity to listen to the voices of those who have been othered and allow them the chance to be heard and understood. She does not employ the traditional template of persuasion in her writing; rather, she uses invitational rhetoric to invite readers to learn and foster a community based on relationships and equality (Ingwerson 52).

Let me be clear; *vulnerability* is what gives a person authority. Not motherhood, not power, not control. Those who are willing to open themselves to the people around them; to nurture them, preserve them, and respect their conscience, show them an “unconventional” way of living life. I say unconventional because the conventional lifestyle we are familiar with is one of patriarchal authority, not of maternalistic vulnerability. Within the current authoritarian structure, the mother is valorized for being a martyr—one who gives from themselves for others—because of the nature of authoritarian systems to take until there is nothing left. This, in turn, facilitates the control and power-mongering within the system. It feeds itself, but maternal authority feeds itself by feeding those around it through recognizing vulnerability and respecting it—not taking from it.

3. Love Medicine Analysis

In her analysis, Mambrol argues that “June fails in her last attempts to attain two goals that other characters will also seek throughout the novel: love and home” (2).

3.1 June

June Morrisey is the central maternal authority figure of *Love Medicine*. She embodies that authority in a passive way—by presenting those she encounters with opportunities. She gives people a chance to prove her wrong about how she has been led to believe life is. June presents the opportunity and hopes, every time, that the people around her will choose to take up a maternal authority position, rather than that of an authoritarian one. This lonesome responsibility weighs heavily upon her, but she continues to do the work.

And then she knew that if she lay there any longer she would crack wide open, not in one place but in many pieces that he would crush by moving in his sleep. She thought to pull herself together (Erdrich 5).

Not only has she presented this strange man with a choice, but she has followed through with how she gave him those choices. June feels herself cracking into pieces under the weight of a casual acquaintance. He becomes the weight she feels every day and she, to preserve herself, has to escape from under him to keep herself in one piece, to free herself. The cracks she feels there follow her into the open air, urging her to split herself apart. And she does, walking into the weight of a snowstorm.

Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. Her feet grew numb, but she did not worry about the distance. The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course. She continued. Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackling cold it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.

The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and came home (Erdrich 6).

June never *physically* makes it back home, but the "pure part" of her does (Erdrich 4). The part of her that pulls together her community makes it home, and it convinces her son to be his own true self. By coming apart, June pulls together. She isn't gone. She is ever present in her physical absence.

3.2 Marie

From a young age, Marie Kashpaw (Morrissey) adheres to a strictly authoritarian mind frame. She believes she is destined for sainthood and tries to enter the convent to accomplish that goal. She believes that she is a worthy opponent for the equally-authoritarian Sister Leopolda, but quickly realizes that she does not have the power in that community to succeed—no one does. So, she leaves. In doing so, Marie encounters Nectar and influences him with the power she's since learned to wield.

We are unsheltered by bushes. Anyone could have seen us. I glance around. On the hill, the windows dark in the white-washed brick seem to harbor a thousand holy eyes widening and narrowing.

How could I? It is then I panic, mouth hanging open, all but certain. They saw! I can hardly believe what I have done.

Marie is watching me. She sees me swing blind to the white face of the convent. She knows exactly what is going through my mind.

“I hope they saw it,” she says in the crow's rasp (Erdrich 61).

Though the scene is from Nectar's perspective, it illustrates Marie's desire to hurt those around her who present any kind of vulnerability. She has been hurt by the nuns in the convent and therefore hopes to return that hurt with sin and disdain. She wants to hurt those who hurt her, and she does so without any regard to those she involves in her own actions. Somehow, she views this as pushing back against the nuns who refused her divinity. Instead of living a life of preservation, she chooses one of destruction.

This is how I take Marie's hand. This is how I hold her wounded hand in my hand.

She never looks at me. I don't think she dares let me see her face. We sit alone. The sun falls down the side of the world and the hill goes dark. Her hand grows thick and fevered, heavy in my own, and I don't want her, but I want her, and I cannot let go (Erdrich 62).

Marie and Nectar begin their life-long relationship with pain, pity, and humiliation. They prey upon each other's weaknesses and strike when they know the other is at their most vulnerable. They start their marriage and family by victimizing each other. Neither care about the other's vulnerability. They care only for achieving their own goals by using the authoritarian power structure that they've been taught—especially since they have seen it work.

Marie is the authoritarian counterpart of June Morrissey. She is the one who teaches the child about the authoritarian social structure, though neither may realize it. Marie doesn't have space in her home or her life for anything maternal. This is an incredible and apparent irony because Marie takes in children to fill the void she feels because of her own two baby's deaths (Erdrich 64). She *appears* to those around her as a maternal character by taking these children in but raises them in her authoritarian way:

I didn't want June Morrissey when they first brought her to my house. But I ended up keeping her the way I would later end up keeping her son, Lipsha, when they brought him up the steps (Erdrich 63).

Marie takes her niece in when June's mother dies. But she tells us straight off that she didn't want to take the child in at all. Marie didn't want June because of the association with the undesirable people she has cast off and outgrown. *Something* in June made Marie want to

take her in and keep her. I argue that this *something* is June's ability to perceive vulnerability. Marie envies this sight and covets what she does not have. Regardless of her own life (as we see when June nearly allows herself to be hanged), she is able to understand the others need for someone to nurture them (Erdrich 67). Which she does.

Even the language that Marie uses to herself indicates the authoritarian lean that she has within her; Marie "kept" June, and she "kept" Lipsha. She uses language that create a feeling of ownership—this is the language of the authoritarian mother, who uses her role as "mother" to give herself more power in her community.

So I took the girl. I kept her. It wasn't long before I would want to hold her against me tighter than any of the others. She was like me, and she was not like me.

Sometimes I thought she was more like Eli. The woods were in June, after all, just like in him, and maybe more (65).

Marie takes June into her own home, not because she wanted to raise her and give her a safe space to live and thrive, but because she wanted the child for *herself*. Several times throughout the novel, we see Marie's shrouded desire for Eli, and she sees the commonality between Eli and June. She takes that commonality and gives it to herself—to make herself feel better about her situation in life with her husband, Nectar. Marie understand that her life is not going the way she planned it would, though she does not understand that her authoritarian ways are what is keeping her from preserving and nurturing herself. Here, June confronts Marie about leaving:

I was peeling potatoes in the same chair we sat in the night before. But she'd slept through that, of course, and would not remember.

“I want to live with Eli,” she said in a voice clear as the voice she used giving directions to be hung. “I’m going to Eli’s house.”

“Go ahead, then,” I said (72).

June realizes that the home in which she can grow and thrive into her true self is with Eli, not with Marie. So, to preserve herself, June moves away from the authoritarian Marie and toward the more maternal Eli. We see the self-serving, yet unwilling to admit defeat, part of Marie when June tells her that she’s leaving. Because of her authoritarian nature, Marie can’t allow herself to admit that she has lost something she treasured. The authoritarian does not allow room for vulnerability. So, Marie lets June leave. She cannot and does not explain to June the ramifications of her preserving actions.

3.3 Lipsha

Lipsha is the maternal extension of his mother, June. She immediately understood her nurturing role as one of moving *away* from being a mother. Though she could nurture and preserve her community, she would be unable to guide Lipsha toward his own maternal self. Like June, he would not be crushed in an authoritarian environment, rather through the development of his own conscience and deep respect for others, he would subvert its power. But he grew to understand that vulnerability could be a strength like his ability to see others vulnerabilities and to help nurture and preserve them in ways they had not been before.

“Lipsha,” he said, “we are glad your mother didn’t want you because we was always looking for a boy like you who would tow us around the lake.”

“I ain’t no snapper. Snappers is so stupid they stay alive when their head’s chopped off,” I said.

“That ain’t stupidity,” said Grandpa. “Their brain’s just in their heart, like yours is” (209).

Lipsha understands early on that he thinks differently than the rest of the people he lives with and around. His head is in his heart and he has always worked to keep his community conflict free, if possible. Lipsha knows that a community cannot survive on conflict, but must come together through mutual vulnerability.

“You got to be with your own kind now,” I said. I felt him [Grandpa Nectar] retreating, like a sigh, growing less. I felt his spirit as it shrunk back through the walls, the blinds, the brick courtyard of Senior Citizens. “Look up Aunt June,” I whispered as he left (Erdrich 213).

When Grandpa Nectar dies (due in part to Lipsha’s playing within the authoritarian structures around him), Lipsha reminds him of his connections to other people. Though he is dead, Lipsha reminds Nectar to “look up Aunt June,” knowing that they belong in the same space, thereby preserving their community from beyond the physical space. The community is separated into the living and the dead, but Lipsha understands that the community can still flourish in death. He gives Nectar another chance to do the same.

I had gotten humble in the past week, not just losing the touch but getting jolted into the understanding that would prey on me from here on out. Your life feels different on you, once you greet death and understand your heart’s position (213).

Here Lipsha finally realizes his calling to continue the work his mother did—keeping his community together. He recognizes his own vulnerability and accepts it. He recognizes the vulnerability of his grandparents, Lulu, and even his brother King. It is from the standpoint of

the periphery that Lipsha can see the community contained within, and without his integral vision, the community breaks down. When Lipsha grasps his role within his community, things finally begin to settle into place. By this, I mean that relationships begin to pull back together. He begins to put the preservation and respect back in the community. Though there has been so much violence up to this point, preservation, nurturing, and respect for others has subdued it. There is no reason for the violence to carry on once it has been unmasked as ugly authoritarian behavior. Because June's absence created a maternal vacuum, there was nothing but mayhem caused by the dominant authoritarian presence. Lipsha picks up the mantle of the maternal character and reestablishes his community and its perseverance. He finally understands his "heart's position."

4. Conclusion

The maternal authority in *Love Medicine* is present through the characters of June and Lipsha, and directly foiled by Marie. June had to let Lipsha get away from her, to grow up in an authoritarian system as she did, to understand the maternal authority he seemed to gravitate toward. Marie, on the other hand, only wanted power and control. She saw vulnerability, or "weakness" as she might say, and sought to exploit it. She actively forged Nectar's path for him, even when he wanted something else. Marie took in too many children for her to possibly care for in a maternally responsible way, instead relying on the children to care for themselves.

Lipsha, through June and then on his own, understands that the confrontations between King and himself emerge from their differing views on vulnerability. Lipsha resorts

to violence only once and is beaten himself. He recognizes that King's violence stems from his own instability and fear of vulnerability. King has absorbed Marie's idea that vulnerability is weakness, while Lipsha sees that vulnerability is a true power. By recognizing that vulnerability, Lipsha is able to nurture those who need it, like Marie. He is able to preserve his community, as he does when he meets his father Gordie, by knowing his own past. And he respects the conscience of those around him, like King and Howard; in recognizing and respecting their conscience, these characters become aware of their own capacity for moral choices. Though he doesn't agree with how they function in the social structure they adhere to, he still works with them—beside them. Because that is the authority of the maternal characters. They seek to preserve, respect, and nurture—regardless of whether those they are helping also adhere to those maternal authority tenets.

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