

Place Identity and Community Memory in Louise Erdrich's the Plague of Doves

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Abstract: Drawing on the concept of identity as both a communal and spatial phenomenon, the article examines how the small town of Pluto functions as a central framework through which individual and collective identities are negotiated. Particular attention is given to the narrative perspective of Evelina, whose engagement with family history, memory, and communal relationships illustrates the process of identity formation rooted in place. The paper highlights how genealogical reconstruction and the tracing of historical trauma contribute to a deeper understanding of belonging and selfhood. In addition, the analysis focuses on the character of Shamengwa as a cultural mediator who embodies the transmission of indigenous values, traditions, and collective memory. Through symbolic elements such as music and oral tradition, the novel articulates the interconnectedness of identity, culture, and land. The concept of community is further reinforced through shared experiences, ethical values, and resilience in the face of historical injustice. Ultimately, the article argues that place identity in the novel is not a static construct but a dynamic process shaped by memory, cultural continuity, and social interaction. In this sense, setting transcends its descriptive function and becomes an active force in shaping both individual consciousness and collective existence.

Keywords: Place Identity, Community Identity, Cultural Memory, Indigenous Identity, Character Formation; Spatial Identity, Collective Trauma, Oral Tradition, Native American Literature, The Plague of Doves, Louise Erdrich, Identity Construction; Social Space, Genealogical Memory.

Introduction

In contemporary literary studies, identity is increasingly understood as a dynamic and relational process shaped by cultural, historical, and spatial contexts. Within this framework, the concept of place identity has gained particular significance, emphasizing how physical and symbolic environments contribute to the formation of individual and collective selfhood. In Native American literature, this relationship is especially pronounced, as identity is often deeply rooted in land, ancestry, and communal memory. Place functions not merely as a backdrop for narrative events but as an active force that encodes cultural meaning and sustains continuity across generations.

The fiction of Louise Erdrich provides a rich context for examining these dynamics, particularly in *The Plague of Doves*, where the town of Pluto operates as a central site of identity formation. While existing scholarship has explored themes of memory and trauma in Erdrich's work, the role of place identity in shaping character development remains underexamined. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how place, memory, and

community interact in the novel, arguing that identity emerges as a continuous process grounded in spatial belonging and cultural transmission.

Methodology

The concept of identity has been extensively theorized across disciplines, with contemporary scholarship emphasizing its dynamic and constructed nature. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity should be understood not as a fixed essence but as a process of “becoming,” shaped by history, culture, and representation. Similarly, Erik Erikson (1968) conceptualizes identity formation as a developmental and socially embedded process, highlighting the role of historical continuity and social interaction. These perspectives provide a foundation for analyzing identity as relational and evolving rather than static.

Within this broader framework, the notion of place identity has gained prominence in environmental psychology and human geography. Harold M. Proshansky et al. (1983) define place identity as a substructure of self-identity that consists of cognitions about the physical environment, contributing to an individual’s sense of continuity and belonging. Likewise, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) emphasizes the experiential dimension of place, arguing that space becomes place through emotional attachment and lived experience. These theoretical approaches suggest that place is not merely a physical setting but a meaningful construct that shapes personal and collective identity.

The relationship between place and identity has also been explored in social psychology. Maria Lewicka (2011) highlights that place attachment and place identity are closely linked, with the former referring to emotional bonds and the latter to cognitive self-definition in relation to place. Lewicka’s work underscores the importance of memory and continuity, suggesting that attachment to place often emerges through narratives of the past and shared experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant for literary analysis, where fictional spaces often function as repositories of memory and identity.

In addition to spatial frameworks, the concept of cultural memory plays a crucial role in identity construction. Jan Assmann (1995) defines cultural memory as the collective storage of knowledge, traditions, and narratives that shape a group’s identity over time. Cultural memory is transmitted through symbolic forms such as storytelling, rituals, and language, allowing communities to maintain continuity across generations. In literary contexts, memory often becomes a narrative device through which characters reconstruct their past and negotiate their identity.

Result and Discussion

Culture means the authentic, grounded territory of the practices, representations, languages, and customs of any particular historical society, as well as the contradictory forms of common sense that have taken root in the life of a people and helped shape it. The identity of the communities has certain responsibilities associated with role functions; they are responsible for the past, present, and future; they solve jointly arising difficulties and issues with improvement. Identity, as we see it, is explicated at least on two levels: the community and a specific location. In the novel, the small town of Pluto plays a vital role in connecting the people who reside in it. Especially the characters who belong to various

communities share their own culture, values, and traditions. Evelina's ancestors are the people with a long history of complications and challenges. Every single family member tries to reveal the secrets that are hidden in their bloody past. 'As I came to the end of my small leopard-print diary (its key useless as my brother had broken the clasp), I wrote down as much of Mooshum's story as I could remember, and then the relatives of everyone I knew—parents, grandparents, way on back in time. I traced the blood history of the murders through my classmates and friends until I could draw out elaborate spider webs of lines and intersecting circles' [4; 85]. While reading this excerpt, I remembered Louise Erdrich's interview in the program 'One Book, One Minnesota'. In the interview, when she is asked about the role of history in the writing process of the novel *The Plague of Doves*, she declares that every single reader who could come to an end of the novel is able to realize the solution to the mystery [10]. Furthermore, she confesses that in order to write, she collected information from her classmates and talked to the citizens of the town, which provides authenticity to the novel, and here we see some 'autobiographical' resemblance between the character and the author herself. Because above Evelina also mentions the diary she has kept and how she has strived to 'fix' everything that she has heard from her Mooshum in it. Moreover, she mentions the relatives of all members of the community 'way back in time'. Even she mentions how she followed the traces of murder through her classmates and friends until she found a solution to it. This process highlights the path of Evelina and the formation of her place identity connected to the city, community, and social group to which she belongs: kin, school, neighborhood, and family.

There are two main trends that lead to an individual's search for a new identity as adequate compensation for his dissatisfied state. The first is related to the need for individual survival in conditions of unstable society. As part of this trend, the individual is alienated from the larger society with its inherent problems, preferring to solve problems of a personal or everyday nature. Material needs and the need for security may come first. If an individual cannot independently satisfy these needs, he tries to find an object to which he can shift his responsibility for solving this problem.

The second tendency to search for a new identity is a reverse process, when the individual turns to a special way of life, which he perceives as an ideal to strive for. This way of life is characterized by a set of higher values, presented in a stereotypical form among one or another social group. Thanks to this system of values, a person gives external meaning to his existence when included (not necessarily real, but also imaginary) in a given community. It is the second direction of the search for a new identity that interests us in the framework of this article, because in a sense this explains the reasons for the strong ideological differentiation of society at the present time. This is once again confirmed by the observed changes in the social structure of society associated with the emergence of new social groups, layers and public communities as carriers of values.

One more character that attracted our attention while analyzing community identity or community attachment is the character Shamengwa. This character is one of the significant ones in the development of the plot, and he is also the most important person in transmitting the cultural heritage of Native American people to its heirs. Moreover, themes

connected to music, native oral traditions, and connections of identity and culture are portrayed through him. Shamengwa is portrayed by Evelina and Judge Antone Bazil Coutts, but the latter description reveals Shamengwa both explicitly and implicitly. Furthermore, this description helps to understand this character's significance to the formation of place identity in other characters in the novel. In the section entitled 'Shamengwa,' the author first gives a clear description of his physical appearance by stating his 'certain style'. Moreover, Judge Antone Bazil Coutts calls him 'an extremely well-made old person', by counting down his clean habits and starting his preparation himself carefully to meet life every day. The author in this part of the novel again addresses the Ojibwe language and uses the word 'Owehzee', and in the preparation part of Shamengwa this word is used. Owehzee is a value held by the Ojibwa people, which means "to do good." It is an important principle that guides their actions and interactions with others. The significance of owehzee lies in its emphasis on kindness, compassion, and generosity. It encourages individuals to act selflessly, to help others in need, and to build meaningful relationships based on trust and mutual respect. This value is also connected to the concept of reciprocity, where one's good deeds will often be returned in equal measure. Overall, the value of owehzee reflects the Ojibwa people's belief in the importance of community, cooperation, and a strong ethical foundation [11]. The author states that although the government has tried in every way possible to destroy our manhood, we are undefeatable [4; 183]. This sentence highlights indigenous peoples' resilience as community when they faced various historical trauma and injustice towards them. Especially, Shamengwa's love to music, his musical instrument fiddle, illustrates that he is a true member of the community he belongs and does his best to transmit these values to the next generation. The music was more than music—at least what we are used to hearing. The music was feeling itself. The sound connected instantly with something deep and joyous. Those powerful moments of true knowledge that we have to paper over with daily life. The music tapped the back of our terrors, too. Things we'd lived through and didn't want to ever repeat. Shredded imaginings, unadmitted longings, fear and also surprising pleasures. No, we can't live at that pitch. But every so often something shatters like ice and we are in the river of our existence. We are aware. And this realization was in the music, somehow, or in the way Shamengwa played it' [4; 184]. The music and its connection to indigenous people's history, their sufferings and tortures make the reader think over the humanity, its unfair deeds in the period of globalization. Shamengwa is the character not only who reminds cultural heritage of native people, their culture, their fate and deep passion to those days they had in their own land, but also gives the reader emotions connected with land, motherland, relatives that live around us, and dear people whom we value most. Here the music is the symbol of freedom, perseverance, and unity, which means that it helps humanity heal from evil and injustice. Judge Antone Bazil Coutts states that the music that Shamengwa plays has been more than the music; it has made them feel who they are, or at least has helped them get through what they have faced at all, cope with challenges of society, and murders around them.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of place identity as a central mechanism of character formation in *The Plague of Doves* by Louise Erdrich, demonstrating that identity in the novel emerges through a complex interaction between space, memory, and community. The analysis has shown that the town of Pluto functions not merely as a narrative setting but as a dynamic structure that shapes the characters' sense of belonging and self-understanding. Through Evelina's reconstruction of genealogical history and her engagement with collective memory, identity is revealed as a process grounded in the reinterpretation of the past. At the same time, the character of Shamengwa embodies the transmission of cultural values, highlighting the importance of oral tradition, music, and communal ethics in sustaining continuity across generations.

The findings suggest that place identity in the novel is not a static or fixed construct but a fluid and evolving process shaped by historical trauma, cultural resilience, and social interaction. By foregrounding the interconnectedness of land, memory, and community, the novel challenges individualistic models of identity and instead presents selfhood as relational and collectively constituted. Thus, this study contributes to the broader discourse on identity in literary studies by demonstrating that place operates as an active and formative force, one that enables characters to negotiate meaning, reconstruct history, and maintain cultural continuity in the face of disruption.

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