

Style and Voice in Selected Poems by Louise Erdrich:
A Postmodern Perspective

الأسلوب والصوت في قصائد مختارة لـ "لويز إردريتش":
رؤية ما بعد حداثة

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to reveal the style and voice in selected poems by the Native-American poet and novelist Louise Erdrich. A versatile writer, Erdrich has a literary production that remarkably covers a wide range of fields. In addition to her numerous novels, short stories, essays, memoirs, and children's books, she is the author of three collections of poetry. The present paper focuses on three poems, a poem from each collection: 'The Flood' from *Baptism of Desire*, 'Jacklight' (the title poem of the *Jacklight* volume), and 'Birth' from *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems*. These poems can be interpreted as postmodern in their style and voice. A brief introduction to style and voice is given together with an overview about postmodernism and postmodern literature. Erdrich employs her stylistic devices and poetic techniques to reflect her voice in the selected poems--a postmodern voice that speaks for the oppressed woman and reveals her yearnings for liberation from the restraints of a patriarchal society (as in 'The Flood'), reflects her female supremacy and the distinctive triumph she achieves over men (as in 'Jacklight'), and asserts her parental role as a mother and her conviction that caring for children is a shared responsibility based on love and cooperation between husband and wife (as in 'Birth').

Keywords: Louise Erdrich, poems, postmodernism, style, voice.

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المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى الكشف عن الأسلوب والصوت في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة والروائية أمريكية الأصل لويز إردرتش، والتي تتميز بإنتاجها الأدبي الغزير الذي يتنوع ما بين الشعر والرواية والقصة القصيرة والمقال والسيرة الذاتية وأدب الأطفال. ويركز البحث على ثلاث قصائد لإردرتش تمثل دواوينها الشعرية الثلاثة، وتعكس أسلوباً وصوتاً يمكن تفسيرهما بأنهما ما بعد حدثيين. هذا، و يبدأ البحث بمقدمة مختصرة عن معنى وتعريف مصطلحي "الأسلوب" و"الصوت"، إضافةً إلى خلفية موجزة تلقي الضوء على نظرية وأدب ما بعد الحدثية. وتوضح القراءة المتأنية لقصائد إردرتش كيف أن الشاعرة تستخدم أسلوبها الفني بمهارة فائقة تعكس، وبشكل جلي، صوت المتحدثات الأنثى في القصائد المختارة لهذه الدراسة، وهو صوت ما بعد حدثي يعبر عن المرأة المقموعة ويعكس تطلعاتها وآمالها، ويمنحها التحرر من قيود مجتمع ذكوري متعطر؛ ويتضح هذا المعنى بوضوح في قصيدة "الطوفان" من ديوان معمودية الرغبة. ثم تأتي الشاعرة بأسلوبها المتميز لتطرق مجالاً جديداً في العلاقة بين الرجل والمرأة، مجالاً تظهر فيه الأنثى قائدةً منتصرة، لذا ترسم لها الشاعرة - بأسلوبها الشعري المتفرد - صوتاً قوياً تعزز صاحبتة بنجاحها في تأكيد ذاتها، وقدرتها على إحراز نصر مؤزر على قامعها الذكور كما يتضح في قصيدة "جاكليت"، القصيدة الرئيسية في ديوان إردرتش الشعري والذي يحمل نفس عنوان القصيدة. وأخيراً، تستخدم إردرتش أسلوبها وفنائه الشعري المعبرة لتمنح المتحدثات المرأة في شعرها صوتاً جديداً، هادئاً، أقل حدة" من صوتها في القصيدتين السابقتين، صوتاً حنوناً، دافئاً، يعكس دورها الوالدي كأم، ويؤكد إيمانها الراسخ بأن تربية الأطفال ورعايتهم مسئولية مشتركة تقوم علي الحب والتعاون بين الزوج والزوجة، وهذا ما تعبر عنه قصيدة "الميلاد" من ديوان إردرتش الأخير، الشعلة الأولى: قصائد جديدة ومختارة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لويز إردرتش، قصائد، نظرية ما بعد الحدثية، أسلوب، صوت

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In his book, *The Sound on the Page: Style and Voice in Writing*, Ben Yagoda argues that a reader may be inclined to a certain writer, and even writers themselves may fall under each other's spell and attraction; when this takes place, Yagoda points out, it is mostly because of the way the admired author "uses language to forge or reflect an attitude toward the world — that is, it is because of style" (105). In this sense, style is the use of certain techniques that reflect the intended meaning and reveal the desired voice of a writer. Of these stylistic devices are diction, syntax, tone, repetition, enjambment, sound patterns (alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia), and figures of speech (metaphor, simile, personification, apostrophe, paradox, hyperbole, juxtaposition, irony, allusion, allegory, symbolism). The use of these techniques "creates a writer's voice," Bishop and Starkey state, drawing attention that "every decision a writer makes determines [his or her] style, right down to punctuation: using a colon rather than a dash, or a semicolon rather than a period" (152). Voice, on the other hand, is a writer's own, a developed manner that distinguishes one writer from another, that is to say, voice is "a writer's personality on the page," to quote David Everett (40). Thus, voice is what we say, and style is the way we say it. The present paper, accordingly, seeks to reveal the style and voice in selected poems by the Native-American poet and novelist Louise Erdrich who is hailed by critics as "a bright new light – a courageous writer, ... a stunningly effective stylist, and a woman who courageously confronts the realities of Native American life..."(Beidler and Barton 3). The poems chosen for discussion in this paper can be interpreted, the researcher suggests, as postmodern in their style and voice.

Postmodernism is a broad movement in philosophy, architecture, film, literature, art and culture that developed in the late 20th century as a reaction to earlier modernist values and principles. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes and Linda Hutcheon are the best-known postmodernist figures. Postmodernism has distinctive features. One of

these features is the postmodern critique of metanarratives, these master or grand texts such as Marxism, Freudianism, the American Dream, and the Enlightenment; postmodernists see metanarratives "as unfairly totalizing or essentializing in their gross generalizations about the state of humanity and historical process" (Kuznar 127).

Postmodernist thinkers, like Foucault, are against the traditional understanding of history as a series of inevitable events.¹ According to them, the historian should not merely narrate the progress of the past or tell the story of how the past events automatically lead to the present. Rather, they attempt to separate the past from the present, simply because the past is "different, strange, [and] threatening," writes Mark Poster in his article "Foucault and History," explaining how Foucault endeavours to change the role of the historian

from one who gives support to the present by collecting all the meanings of the past and tracing the line of inevitability...to one who breaks off the past from the present and, by demonstrating the foreignness of the past, relativizes and undercuts the legitimacy of the present. (117-118)

A main principle of postmodernism is that truth is relative and not absolute; postmodernists are completely against the pursuit of the ultimate truth. In addition, postmodernism--unlike modernist philosophy which stressed the ideas of order and coherence--embraces the notions of fragmentation and chaos; postmodern works, therefore, mirror the chaotic nature of the world. A basic characteristic of the postmodernist thought is that it dismisses the idea of an authoritative singular view replacing it with a landscape of multiple view points. In this sense, postmodernists regard tolerance of other views as "a supreme value" (Nathan 54).

According to postmodernism, there is much rewriting of history. Therefore, postmodernist writers come to rewrite a kind of history that includes the voices which the traditional texts have excluded such as women, blacks, minorities, and other victims of oppression. In this sense, postmodernism is supportive of the theory of feminism as the postmodernist thought provides feminist writers with "new tools ... to

talk about feminism in terms that are entirely more empowering than previous applications" (Mazza 35). Significantly, postmodernism is concerned with the marginalized groups in society, and for that reason it endows women with the power to express themselves and assert their female experience. Erdrich realizes this shared thread between postmodernism and feminism, and cleverly makes use of it in her poetry as both theories sustain the search of her subjugated speakers for a female voice.

Under the broad umbrella of postmodernism, postmodern literature has emerged to depict postmodern life and culture, encompassing "all those writers who gave house-room to the postmodern hypothesis and all the writing they did about it" (Connor 4). Postmodern literature has certain characteristics. Postmodernist writers have rejected the idea that a work of art contains a single inherent meaning. Alternatively, they think of it as a piece of writing that can be interpreted in a variety of ways; the spectator, postmodernists see, plays an important role in judging and determining the meaning or meanings of the work of art. Intertextuality is another main characteristic of postmodern writing. It means that a literary text is related, in a way or another, to previously written texts. A remarkable feature of postmodern literature is its reliance on pastiche, a technique through which the author combines various ideas and styles from previous works and *pastes* them together to create a new style or voice. Postmodern literature is also marked by its use of metafiction. This technique means writing about writing and is used by postmodernist writers to raise their readers' awareness of the fictional nature of the literary work they are reading. Furthermore, postmodernist writers are known for employing historiographic metafiction in their writings; the term was first introduced by the postmodernist writer Linda Hutcheon in her book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, to refer to novels that fictionalize real historical events. Finally, parody and humor characterize postmodern literature whose authors often tend to treat very serious topics ironically and humorously. However, postmodern parody does not aim at destruction or merely ridiculing an author or a style of writing. This is what Hutcheon draws attention to in her article "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of

History" when she states, "To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. And this is the postmodern paradox" (6).

In the 'Flood', a poem from the volume *Baptism of Desire*, Erdrich uses a variety of stylistic and technical devices that clearly reveal her voice--a postmodern voice that reflects the female suffering, speaks for the oppressed women, and allows their repressed voices to be heard. The title of the poem is taken from a Catholic doctrine. According to the Roman Catholic tradition, baptism by water is a necessary ritual for salvation. Baptism of desire is a substitution for the baptism by water through which a truthful believer can experience spiritual regeneration. "If, without fault on one's part," François Laisney explains, "such a person with baptism of desire (or perfect contrition) is prevented from the exterior reception of the sacrament before his death, he can still go to heaven" (9).

Outstandingly, Erdrich gives her poem, 'The Flood', a highly suggestive title conveying more than one meaning. Firstly, the flood implies the power of change needed to transform the female reality from oppression and marginalization into freedom and self-assertion. The flood with its violent water, one imagines, covers the Native-American scene taking women from the margins into the center. Secondly, the flood can be seen as a sign of purification, cleansing society from its sins and crimes committed against the helpless women who have suffered exclusion in a male-dominated culture. Thirdly, the word 'flood' has religious symbolism, referring to water which is used in the Catholic ritual of baptism as a symbol of renewal and new life, as if the poet wants to say that time has come for the woman in the Native-American tradition to start anew towards asserting herself and finding her own voice. Related to this religious implication, the flood brings into mind Prophet Noah and how he and his followers were supported by the Flood which covered the earth due to human misdeeds and disobedience of God Who flooded the earth so as to remake the world using the ark of Noah. Notably, Erdrich's poetry seeks to reconstruct the reality of women through highlighting the female experience and revealing its uniqueness. In general, the image of

water frequently appears in Erdrich's writings. As an Ojibwe² as well as a person with a Catholic background,

it would be almost impossible for Erdrich to prevent the water imagery from seeping into her [work]..., as the image of water is symbolically important within both cultures. The image of water also pervades both Catholicism and the Ojibwe religion. In one it is a source of blessing, the other a source of fear. Erdrich not only allows water imagery to work its way into her work, she wholeheartedly embraces it, to such an extent that her first novel, *Love Medicine*, revolves around the theme of water. (Taylor 6)

'The Flood' opens with the female speaker narrating how she is disappointingly imprisoned within the restraints of a patriarchal ideology which hinders her freedom, represses her voice, and renders her position as inferior and trivial. Erdrich writes:

I was twelve the year I slept in the earth,
in a perfect room lined with scentless wood.
It was the best place, the basement.
In the rhythm of appliances,
a child sleeps as though she wasn't born.
The washer boom into the night
like an emotional heart, the refrigerator knocked,
dragged out the bones and argued.
The furnace was a fiery lung, but I was safe, surrounded by
plumbing.

(*Baptism of Desire* 73)

The place where the female speaker finds herself in, since she has been a young child aged twelve, clearly reflects the inferior position of the woman. Irony, as a literary technique, is employed by the poet who sarcastically describes this place as 'a perfect room lined with scentless wood'. The poet's ironical tone increases as she mockingly refers to the room as 'the best place, the basement.' In fact, the place provided for the speaker is nothing but a perfectly locked room whose walls are covered with cheap and old-fashioned wood. To add to the speaker's dilemma and

inferiority, the room is situated in the lower floor where unnecessary things are stored, as if women are worthless and insignificant. This depiction reveals how the female speaker is imprisoned and isolated from the outside world. This is the position of the woman in the Native-American society. Simile is skillfully used by the poet in the above stanza to reflect this low-grade stance. The speaker compares herself at the time of sleep to a dead person who 'wasn't born' or whose existence reflects a useless, meaningless life that can best be described as death-in-life. The societal repression of the female speaker is further represented by the imagery of the 'appliances' around her, in the basement. Simile is again used to show how 'the washer' roars loudly in the quiet night as if it were an affecting heart beating endlessly. Similarly, the refrigerator knocks producing a disturbing sound that gets inside the helpless woman as if it were pulling her 'bones' out. Another domestic device is the heater which is compared to a burning lung, frightening and disturbing the powerless speaker who can find no rest at all in such a horrible, upsetting place which imaginatively stands for the authoritarian society that oppresses the woman and spoils its way of living.

Strangely enough, the speaker declares that--despite all these dangers--she is 'safe' as she has been surrounded by the 'plumbing' system of the building which is mostly located in the basement. Here, the image of water, represented by the stagnant water in the plumbs, emerges to provide the woman with protection and safety at the time of danger and threat. Erdrich's message here is very strong and effective; she wants to say that if women, who are seen by the society as inferior and insignificant, are ever meant to be protected, then they can only be protected by the water of the plumbing system which, in the eyes of a domineering community, provides an inferior kind of protection. Whatever the outlook towards the female is, Erdrich brilliantly uses water--even in its inactive form--as a savior of women, therefore, drawing attention to the importance of water imagery in her poetry. For Erdrich, "the main image" in her works "is the recurring image of the water – transformation...and a sort of transcendence" (Interview with Hertha Wong 44).

As a postmodernist writer, Erdrich uses intertextuality in her poem to affirm that the social scene which excludes women to the margins and belittles her role in life needs to be completely altered. The poet alludes to both the Bible and the Native American mythology where the flood narratives are common. According to the Bible, the story of the flood opens as follows:

And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation. Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female. Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female; to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth. For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth. And Noah did according unto all that the LORD commanded him. And Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters was upon the earth. (*King James Version 26-27*)

Likewise, the flood in the Native American myths is seen as a power of transformation and recreation. In *Handbook of Native American Mythology*, Bastian and Mitchell show that "the flood was caused by arrogant people who offended the sun. The god Tirawa destroyed them and monsters in a great flood and then created new people for the earth" (98). Pararely, Erdrich depicts the flood as a force of change that overcomes the male rigid mentality and enables the Native American woman to take the lead and become the creator of her own reality.

Having allowed the imagery of water to appear suddenly at the end of the first stanza, even in its inactive form, as a force of support and protection for the oppressed and socially isolated woman, Erdrich comes after that to give a more powerful intervention for water in the rest of the stanzas in which the poet narrates the story of the flood and how it symbolically interferes and violently emerges in the poem to liberate women from oppression and domination. The following stanza reveals the

chaotic condition that accompanies the beginnings of the flood. The female speaker recounts:

Over me, when everything had fallen into ruin,
.....
I heard my sisters dig forward with their paws
.....
And then the snow came down, collapsing the sky
around us in a blank information. (*Baptism of Desire* 73)

As the lines reveal, a state of chaos and confusion has prevailed and the whole society, with all its values and traditions, has collapsed and 'fallen into ruin'. The flood has started. Looking for her fellow sisters, the Native American women, the female speaker has found them digging and struggling hard for survival, using their 'paws', a metaphor that reflects their insistence on life and at the same time implies the inferior outlook the Native American society adopts towards women scornfully regarding them as animals with 'paws'. Obviously, this image intensifies the struggle of women against subjugation and repression. As usual, Erdrich surprises us by making the water imagery penetrate the scene and come on the most suitable time to save women; all of a sudden, the snow has fallen down 'collapsing' the sky and clearing the vision in front of the female speaker and her fellow sisters who have been struggling hard to find their own way and get liberated from obstinate patriarchy.

Impressively, Erdrich narrates the story of freeing women from domination and suppression allowing us, as readers, to follow up the liberation stage step by step. The flood, with its 'violent' rains and waters, was the main agent of change, the principal power of releasing women and taking them, safely, to the shores of freedom and self-assertion. Here are the details of the tale:

In the spring it happened, as it was meant to.
The violent rain surged through the walls,
forced me out the cellar hatch in a round blue tub.
The calls of my brothers came over the string-can telephone.
Come in! Do you read me! But I was gone.
The river hammered and bubbled through the drains,

the line snapped, their voices grew fierce as mosquitoes
dancing on the head of a pin, clouding the wreckage
I passed, as the flood rushed me over its wide surface,
shredding my nightgown, my shawl of stingers.

(Baptism of Desire 73)

Significantly, the liberation stage started at the season of spring 'as it was meant to'. Spring, the time of rebirth and renewal, highly suits the situation in which the values and traditions of society are to be transformed. The power of change, represented by the flood and its forces, takes women from the margins into the center of the social scene, enabling them to find their own voice and discover their new vision.

Diction is one of the stylistic devices Erdrich uses in the poem to convey her voice and reflect the powerful effect of the flood. The choice of rough words such as 'violent', 'surged', 'forced', 'hammered', and 'fierce' shows how the flood violently rushed, destroying the 'walls' that had surrounded the female speaker. The use of the word 'walls' here is very suggestive as it symbolizes the boundaries of patriarchy which imprison women and restrict their freedom. Then, the violent waters of the flood strongly rushed and took the woman speaker out of her 'cellar'. The flood not only destroyed the symbolical barriers that had locked the Native-American woman and confined her free will, but it also wiped out the wrong beliefs and unfair standards of society that had long silenced the female and prevented her from asserting her female identity.

Erdrich draws attention that the liberation of her female speaker in 'The Flood' was not an easy task, because the Native-American society, with its rigid ideologies, would not easily allow such a step to happen. This is what the woman speaker states in the fourth line which clarifies how her 'brothers' attempted hard to convince her to resist the flood and not to go out of the basement where she had long stayed. The use of the word 'brothers' is significant, referring to the male members of society, the main cause of the woman's suffering and lack of freedom. However, the poet depicts the male communication with the female speaker as weak, primitive, and ineffective as it took place via 'the string-can telephone', therefore, lacking the strong effect of the face-to-face speech.

Determinant not to return to a domineering past, the woman speaker paid a deaf ear to the male 'voices' which--urging her to remain in her inferior position--'grew fierce' as if they were 'mosquitoes / dancing on the head of a pin'. Here, the simile not only reveals the non-stop attempts of men to keep women repressed and marginalized, but also conveys how the decisive female speaker regards these male efforts as trivial and hopeless exactly like the useless actions of a mosquito that desperately dances 'on the head of a pen'. However, these masculine, futile 'calls' are sharply juxtaposed with the confidence and self-determination of the female speaker who decisively went on in her way towards independence and self-assertion. She proudly declares in the poem, "But I was gone",

I passed, as the flood rushed me over its wide surface,
shredding my nightgown, my shawl of stingers.

(Baptism of Desire 73)

Personified as a strong human being, the flood powerfully rescued the female speaker by rushing her 'over its wide surface', taking off her night clothes and her 'shawl' that hid the damage and insult practiced against her by a patriarchal society. Symbolically, the flood has brought the woman back to its beginnings as a naked, innocent child who has not yet been polluted by the wrongdoings and crimes of a sinful world. This brings into mind the Catholic ritual of baptism by water in which, Catholics believe, "the initiate dies to the old ways in the waters of the font and is reborn in Christ. The flood myth is the given culture's dream of rebirth, re-creation, and renewal from the chaotic maternal waters" (Leeming 138). In Erdrich's poem, the flood not only saved the female speaker, but its waters also cleansed her and returned her to the first phases of purity, providing her with the opportunity to start afresh as a new person.

As a woman poet, Erdrich attempts in 'The Flood' to fulfill her mission of releasing women from the chains that restrict their freedom. Accordingly, she uses the past tense throughout the stanza quoted above, as seen in 'surged', 'forced', 'came', 'hammered', 'bubbled', 'snapped', 'grew', 'rushed', 'was', 'passed', etc. in order to confirm for her readers that

the liberation of women has already happened and her task has by now completed.

Happy of her liberation, the female speaker in Erdrich's poetry begins to practice her role as an independent woman with a powerful voice and a clear vision. She confidently comes to re-evaluate her relationship with the male side, deciding to reverse the situation and to become the leader and the initiator of every male / female experience. This meaning is embodied in 'Jacklight', the title poem of the *Jacklight* collection. The poem tells the story of a male / female conflict in which the hunters chase a group of deer in the woods in order to hunt them. However, the scenario is suddenly inverted and the hunters become the hunted. The hunters here stand for men and the deer symbolize women. The title of the poem refers to a kind of an artificial light, a flashlight that is usually used by the hunters at night in order to "paralyze and disorient prey" (Kurup 92). In the poem, the female speaker declares her decisive intention not to let men dominate the scene anymore. She determinedly states in the poem, "It is their turn now, / their turn to follow us..." (*Jacklight* 4). This is what Erdrich exactly seeks to achieve in her poetry in general and in 'Jacklight' in particular, 'a transformation' of the male-dominated relationship between men and women. In an interview with Jan George, conducted shortly after the publication of *Jacklight*, the poet points out:

In the male tradition, men are the hunters and women are their prey, but in the poem 'Jacklight,' I am trying to say something like this: If our relationships are ever going to be human, and not just play-by-numbers, men have to follow women into the woods and women likewise. There must be an exchange, a transformation, a power shared between them. (243)

In this sense, Erdrich tries to put an end to the long silence of women and reverse their female reality not only through exploring their own history but also through rewriting, reinterpreting and reweaving it so that the female can find herself a place on its pages, can express herself, and can tell her own story.

In 'Jacklight', the male hunters are transformed into the hunted; they are caught by the women who are hiding in the 'woods'. The female speaker narrates,

We have come to the edge of the woods,
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,
out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut,
out of our hiding. (*Jacklight* 3)

Disturbed by the flashlight used by the male hunters, the woman speaker and her female companions came out of 'hiding' in 'the woods' where they had kept themselves out of sight among the 'brown grass', the intertwined branches, and the 'leaves' of the trees--a natural setting with which they are familiar. It is worth noting that women would not have been seen if they had remained hidden, as the huntsmen had not discovered them. However, they chose to reveal themselves and become the initiators of the fight. Enthusiastic to win the battle and change their female reality, they decided to confront their hunters and defeat them.

As usual, Erdrich employs highly expressive techniques that vividly convey her message and impressively emphasize her female voice. The alliteration in the first line, where the two words 'we' and 'woods' start with the same consonant /w/, creates a connection between women and woods. The word 'woods' is regarded as the shelter for the woman speaker and her female companions. It stands for nature which the poet sees in the poem as the savior and supporter of her female speaker, exactly like water that has previously rescued and protected her in 'The Flood'. As Erdrich puts it, "The woods to me have always been a place of mystery, shelter. That's where we have to go to find each other" (qtd. in Barak 49).

Anaphora is also noted in the above stanza where the word 'out' is repeated at the beginning of four successive phrases (out of brown grass where we slept, unseen, / out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut, / out of our hiding). The repetition here implies the eagerness and determination of the woman speaker and her female companions to go 'out' of their shelter and face their male oppressors who mainly come to the forest to captivate women. Moreover, the repetition of the sound /s/ in

the words 'grass', 'slept' and 'unseen' in the second line suggests an atmosphere of secrecy and works in harmony with the idea of 'hiding' expressed in the stanza. Onomatopoeia is employed by the poet in the third line where the word 'creaked' expresses the noise produced when women walked upon the leaves which 'creaked' under their feet producing a harsh or squeaking sound. The produced sound can imaginatively be regarded as an announcement for the hiding women to go 'out' of their place and start attacking the male hunters.

The huntsmen carrying the 'jacklight' are described by the female speaker in a negative way:

We smell them behind it
but they are faceless, invisible.
We smell the raw steel of their gun barrels,
mink oil on leather, their tongues of sour barley. (*Jacklight* 3)

Men, the woman speaker narrates, are 'faceless', 'invisible', and ineffective, with only the specific smells coming out of them to identify their state. Women can smell the 'raw steel' of which their 'gun barrels' are manufactured, the 'mink oil' on their leather clothes, and their mouths which are smelling 'sour barely' of which beer is made.

In the lines quoted above, Erdrich uses what Geoffrey Leech calls 'intermittent free verbal repetition'. According to Leech's book, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, this device means that the repeated lexical items in a literary text are separated from each other by other words (77-78). An example of intermittent free verbal repetition is clear in the above lines as the structure 'we smell' is repeated in the first and third lines. The repetition here reflects the women's keenness to discover everything about their male rivals even their smells so that women can get ready for facing them. In addition, the repetition of 'we smell' reveals the alertness and attentiveness of the women who are watching the hunting men very carefully. As a poetic technique, assonance is also observed in the second line where the diphthong /ei/ is repeated in the words 'they' and 'faceless'. In addition to the musicality it produces, assonance here connects the two words together drawing attention to the idea of how the woman speaker and her female companions can cleverly identify the male

hunters despite the fact that 'they' have been 'faceless' and indistinguishable at night.

The poem ends with a note of triumph as women successfully overcome the supremacy of men, transforming the male hunters into the hunted. The female speaker proudly tells us how the battle ended with men putting down 'their equipment' and surrendering to the authority of women. She confidently affirms that from now on, female preeminence will prevail over men and their power:

It is their turn now,
their turn to follow us. Listen,
they put down their equipment.
It is useless in the tall brush steps, not knowing
how deep the woods are and lightless.
How deep the woods are. (*Jacklight* 4)

As the lines reveal, it is the 'turn' of the male hunters now to 'follow' the woman speaker and her female companions into 'the woods', that is, into nature, the home and shelter of women. To add to men's predicament, their 'equipment', the jacklight, has proved to be futile and unsuccessful in the darkness of the 'tall bush' and thick trees of the forest; therefore, they have had to 'put' it 'down' having no other option but to go behind' women who expertly attracted them into 'the woods'. In this way, "the deer hunt is transformed into a moment of feminine seduction. The vulnerability of the deer / women on the edge of the treeline is inverted as they draw the hunters inside." (Stirrup 48). Proudly enough, the woman speaker indicates how men are led into the forest 'not knowing / how deep the woods are', as they have been taken to a territory completely unknown for them but fully familiar to their female leaders.

Erdrich brilliantly makes style reveal voice. The repetition of the phrase 'their turn' in the above lines works as a reminder for men of the new standard governing their relationship with the female side; women are the leaders and men have to accept this newly acquired leadership and 'follow' women. In addition, the word 'turn' implies fairness as it means that men have already practiced their role as the leading figures of the

male / female relationship and now it is the time of women to enjoy this privilege.

Furthermore, apostrophe is noted in the second line of the above stanza. Here, the female speaker addresses us, the auditors of her story, to 'listen' to the details of men's defeat in their battle with women and how the huntsmen 'put down their equipment' and had to 'follow' women in 'the woods'. This, of course, suggests how proud and enthusiastic the woman speaker is to recount everything about the distinctive triumph which she and her female companions have achieved over men.

To convey the voice of her victorious female speaker in 'Jacklight', Erdrich employs stylistic devices that usually characterize postmodern writing. Of these are intertextuality and situational irony. Intertextuality is obvious in the last part of the final stanza in which the poet states:

...not knowing
how deep the woods are and lightless.
How deep the woods are. (*Jacklight* 4)

There is a reference here to Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', a poem that concludes as follows:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. (224)

Both poets acknowledge that 'the woods' are 'dark and deep'. Accordingly, people who are unfamiliar with such a place may easily get lost there and find themselves in a wholly unknown area exactly like what happened for the male hunters in Erdrich's poem when they were tempted, by women, to go into the forest "not knowing/ how deep the woods are and lightless'.

To create an unexpected transformation in the male / female relationship at the end of the poem, Erdrich uses situational irony, a literary device referring to an event or a situation in which what actually happens is significantly different from what is expected. It is anticipated at the beginning of the poem that the male hunters will succeed in

catching women as victims. However, by the end of the poem, the spell of the huntsmen's artificial light becomes ineffective in the vast darkness of the woods, and roles are unexpectedly switched. The male hunters are hunted by women and have to 'follow' them 'into the woods'. Thus, the battle ends with the woman speaker and her companions imposing their female lead.

After liberating herself in 'The Flood' and attaining female supremacy in 'Jacklight', the woman speaker in Erdrich's poetry now comes to direct her female energy to an entirely new direction. Outstandingly, she has reshaped her relationship with her male counterpart achieving what she has long yearned for, "an exchange, a transformation, a power shared between them", to quote Erdrich. (George 243). More importantly, she has proven for the man that her role in life is not less valuable than his and that the woman can remarkably take the lead and can distinctively confirm her female significance. However, the triumph which the female speaker has accomplished in 'Jacklight' does not make her forget her essential role as a wife and a mother.

In the light of her newly attained stance as a triumphant woman, she confidently declares her full conviction that both the male and the female have a shared mission in life and that their relationship is based on mutuality and integration. According to her, the main purpose behind the creation of the man and the woman by God is to let them form a family, unite together, and contribute to the total welfare of the universe. Now, the female speaker in Erdrich's poetry convincingly devotes her full potentialities to her family whose two axes, wife and husband, recognize their joint responsibility in caring for their children and preparing them to be good citizens in society. All these meanings are expressed in 'Birth', a short but meaningful poem from Erdrich's latest collection of poetry, *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems*. In the poem which consists of five lines only, the female speaker is a mother who satisfactorily tells her readers how she and her husband lovingly sit beside each other, preparing themselves to receive their birthed infant:

When they were wild
When they were not yet human

When they could have been anything,
I was on the other side ready with milk to lure them,
And their father, too, each name a net in his hands.
(*Original Fire* 132)

The poem stresses the notion that children's birth unites the mother and the father together, giving them the chance to practice their parental role, each in his own way. Before their dear, young creatures come to this world, the parents fondly arrange everything for them. The mother becomes keen to provide nutrition as she gets 'ready with milk' in order to 'lure' the baby. On the other hand, the father eagerly waits to catch the infant in 'his' own 'hands' while his mind is busy with choosing a name for the child. Obviously, the tone of the poem is that of satisfaction and serenity; a sense of love is felt throughout the lines including the mother, the father, and the children.

Erdrich proficiently employs her poetic techniques to reflect the parental voice of the female speaker in 'Birth'. One of these technical devices is anaphora whose use is clear in the first three lines of the poem where the word 'when' is repeated three times. This repetition brings into mind the countless times in life 'when' children become in need for support from their parents, especially at their early stages of growth. Of course, both mother and father do their best to satisfy the needs of their children and generously provide them with love and care. In addition, the use of the word 'too' immediately after the word 'father' in the last line of the poem is very significant. It implies that the father is a sharer, with the mother, of that happy moment of childbirth as his role is integrated with his wife's in receiving and caring for their children.

To conclude, the style and voice of Erdrich in the poems selected for discussion in this paper are remarkably postmodern. The poet skillfully uses her style to reflect her voice and illuminate her ideas. Of the stylistic devices the poet employs are intertextuality, irony, symbolism, diction, repetition, juxtaposition, apostrophe, personification, simile, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance. In all the poems handled above, the speaker is a woman searching for her voice in different settings. In 'The Flood', the female voice is a repressed one

seeking release and freedom. In 'Jacklight', the voice of the woman speaker is challenging and determinant, yearning for triumph and female lead. In 'Birth', Erdrich's female speaker feels relieved and satisfied after accomplishing her female aspirations and attaining her self-assertion; hers is really a warm, parental voice uniting both mother and father in a wonderful symphony characterized with love and gratitude.

Notes

1. For an insightful analysis of this point, see *Archaeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault, especially "Part I: Introduction," pp.3-22.
2. The Ojibwe (Ojibwa or Chippewa) people reside in the United States and Canada. Ojibwe Country primarily extends from Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Dakota in the United States, and from Quebec, across Ontario and Manitoba to Saskatchewan in Canada (*The Ojibwe People's Dictionary*). For more information, see *The Ojibwe and Their History* by Natalie M. Rosinsky, particularly the part titled "Who are the Ojibwe?" pp. 9-11.

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