

# “A Crusade against Rape”- Elucidating a Social Discourse through Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House* (2012)

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**Abstract**—Violence against women is one of the most ubiquitous abuses of human rights. A research conducted by Amnesty International, a Native American and Alaska Native organization during 2005 and 2006 reported that one in every three native women are raped. It is in this context that Louise Erdrich, an Ojibwe novelist writes her fourteenth novel, *The Round House* addressing the issue of sexual and gendered violence. The novel unfolds through the eyes of a thirteen year old Joe whose mother Geraldine is attacked and the ways in which their family is altered forever after the crime. After this book won Erdrich the National Book Award, Julie Tharp notes that *The Round House* is Erdrich’s “crusade against rape”. This paper expounds as to why there is a need for such significant narratives about women’s plight? What purpose does literature about rape and violence against women serve in the contemporary social discourse? This paper also narrows down how Erdrich’s storytelling of sexual and gendered violence in *The Round House* acts as a weapon to combat years of oppression and struggle

Violence against women is one of the most ubiquitous abuses of human rights. A research conducted by Amnesty International, a Native American and Alaska Native organization during 2005 and 2006 reported that one in every three native women are raped(14). According to US Department of Justice, Native American and Alaska native women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than any women in the US in general ( Amnesty International, 14). It is in this context that Louise Erdrich, an Ojibwe novelist writes her fourteenth novel, *The Round House* addressing the issue of sexual and gendered violence. The novel unfolds through the eyes of a thirteen year old Joe whose mother Geraldine is attacked and the ways in which their family is altered forever after the crime. After this book won Erdrich the National Book Award, Julie Tharp notes that *The Round House* is Erdrich’s “crusade against rape” (25). This paper serves as an analysis of such narratives of women’s plight. What purpose does literature about rape and violence against women serve in the contemporary discourse? This paper also narrows down how Erdrich’s storytelling of sexual

and gendered violence in *The Round House* acts as a weapon to combat years of oppression and struggle.

*The Round House* is a coming of age novel and marks a transition from the perspectives as a teenage to an adult Joe. The novel begins with Joe and his father Bazil, a tribal judge weeding saplings out of the foundation of their house soon to realise that Geraldine his mother is not yet home, as she was always around “the regularity of their habits”( Erdrich 5). Their search for Geraldine ends when she speeds past them going back home. The high point of the novel is marked in the first chapter where Joe and his father finds Geraldine in her car with “vomit down the front of her dress and, [blood] soaking her skirt and soaking the gray cloth of the car seat, her dark blood” ( Erdrich 8). It is later through the first chapter; we understand that although Geraldine was brutally raped, she saved herself from being killed with “gasoline”. This painful incident changed the face of their happy family. Joe describes “the air seems hollow in the house, stale, strangely flat” (24) as Geraldine curled into silence and preferred to be alone. She gave up cooking and Bazil only made coffee that “he drank day and night”. In Joe’s words, “Everything had stopped” (25), the incident turned around the proper functioning of their family structure. Amidst Geraldine’s silence, Bazil and Joe joined pieces to find the mysterious perpetrator in Linden Lark, a non- native. This complicated the things further as being a non-native Linden Lark can never be persecuted under tribal law. Thus, *The Round House* also testifies to the loss of tribal jurisdiction, which directly affected the tribe’s ability to protect Native women from sexual violence (Tharp 26).

Through fictional illustration, Louise Erdrich depicts the harsh reality of injustices and effects of institutional racism on native community. Erdrich’s Geraldine can be considered as a blueprint of Deborah Miranda’s rendition of Vicenta Gutierrez in *Bad Indians: a Tribal Memoir*

“Vicenta Gutierrez, sister of the ‘The Blonde Gutierrez’, when [she was] a girl went to confession one evening during Lent, and Father Real wanted her, to grab her over there in the church. And next day there was no trace of the padre there, and he was never seen again. He probably fled on horseback in the night. Some said he fled to Spain. He was a Spaniard. He grabbed the girl and screwed her. The girl went running to her house, saying the padre had grabbed her.” (Miranda, 22)

Vicenta’s story dates back to the 1700s, when violence against women was normal, rape was not even considered as a crime. Native women were sexually exploited by padres, their autonomy over child bearing was taken away and young girls were kept enclosed in *monjeras* that kept “Native men away, but it did not keep the Spanish soliders away” (Miranda 79). Through Miranda’s *Bad Indians* we understand that Vicenta’s story is a microcosm of rape during the Spanish Missionization of California. Her plight is known in the contemporary discourse only because she showed the courage to tell her story to the world, her form of resistance. This sense of “entitlement to women” was not new in 1700s, but was a convention since Columbus’ expedition. Native women were given away as “incentives” or “rewards” to his subordinates by Columbus. (Todorov 48). Since then, objectifying native women was not considered an atrocity, rather a privilege. This savagery over centuries has infringed the sovereign rights of indigenous communities. To add on to this, lack of legal protection for native communities in general and women in particular helps us understand how Erdrich’s portrayal of Geraldine’s rape is located in a deep and ugly confluence of human history.

Erdrich draws the theme of gendered violence in other characters such as Sonja and Mayla. Curtis Yeltow uses his power as a governor and exploits the underage Mayla, impregnating her. Whitey, Joe’s uncle on the other hand beats Sonja much to the knowledge of everyone in the family. However, Joe also sexualizes Sonja in a degrading manner, masturbating to her pictures and threatening her to let him watch the dance she had planned for Moosham. Sonja shows Joe her breast, cut by her old manager while she was a stripper. Her body reveals a history of violence inflicted on native women. Linden Lark on one hand violently rapes Geraldine and on the other abducts and kills Mayla. Almost every female character in the novel undergoes the trauma of violence. Erdrich writes true to the spirit of time, where every native woman is exposed to some form of violence. This makes us question, why are native women still exploited in contemporary scenario. A look into legislation helps us answer this question.

A series of Supreme Court cases mentioned in chapter three of the novel elicits the restriction imposed on tribal jurisdiction over non- natives. Among these, the Major Crimes Act of 1885 and *Oliphant vs Suquamish* portrays the inability of tribal courts to prosecute non- natives. The Major Crimes Act grants jurisdiction of seven major crimes on tribal land to

federal courts, where *Oliphant vs Suquamish* ruled that “tribal courts do not have inherent jurisdiction to try and punish non-Indians” (Tharp, 4). These laws make native women vulnerable to crimes and justice is often delayed or denied to them. These laws do not recognize the rights of native women, but empowers men to violate them. In the novel, Geraldine recalls Linden Lark saying that Indian women have “no standing under the law for good reason” (Erdrich 161). He believes they should be “crated up and thrown into the lake” (161). Thus, Louise Erdrich not only criticises the treatment of native women in the contemporary world but also points towards legislations that led to tribal disenfranchisement.

*The Round House* published in 2012 poses yet significance as it coincides with the reauthorization of Violence against Women Act (VAWA) of 2013, which extended legal protection to the rights of native women. Under this federal law, sexual and gendered violence against native women is stated as a crime, hence illegal. In an article “Rape on Reservations” for *New York Times*, Erdrich writes how legislation can work in favour of native women and their safety. She adds, “If we are safe, the country is safe” (“Rape on Reservation”). The Reauthorization of VAWA is the result of years of continuous struggle led by the tribes and contribution of native narratives into legal discourse. In legal history or otherwise, there is a dearth of indigenous stories that does add up to the ongoing marginalization. This is why Erdrich’s *The Round House* is not only a literary piece but a movement to the present day discourses about sexual and gendered violence.

So what relevance does these stories, often sad plight of women hold within itself and why do these need to be told. Firstly, such narratives help us understand that the present day events are rooted in history. These stories told by native women or illustrated as a fictional story acts as a powerful weapon to combat these injustices against native women. Such stories provide a voice to the voiceless. Both Deborah Miranda’s portrayal of Vicenta’s story and Erdrich’s fictional narrative of sexual violence in *The Round House* serve a social purpose. While Vicenta’s story is a wakeup call to fight against this injustice, Erdrich’s writing helps to get some perspectives about the issue. These stories in compliance with native practice of storytelling help to educate and heal. These narratives of bold women helps other to raise their voices, heal and value their bodies, by extension their culture. Violation of native bodies is a violation of their culture and these stories form a native act of resistance, as stories are powerful.

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