

Victimization in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House***Dr. Colette Sharmila**

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The Canadian history, in large is the history of the colonization of Aboriginal people. Colonization can be termed as form of invasion, dispossession and subjugation of the first natives. The colonizer / colonized relationship is unequal because the colonizer benefits at the expense of the colonized. Colonizers used different strategies to oppress the colonized in their colonies. The colonized were the marginalized lot. Among the marginalized lot, the women were doubly colonized. Women suffer from multiple oppressions like sexual assaults and objectification of their bodies.

This paper will focus on the traumatic experience of Geraldine, a native - American woman who is sexually assaulted by a White in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*. The article will further throw light on victimization, suffering, resistance and survival.

Keywords: Colonizer/ colonized, oppressed, Double – colonization, Battered, Victimized, Resistance and Survival.

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“It was terrible, but it was true
 ... the man whose act had nearly
 severed my mother's spirit from
 her body” (Erdrich 34, 45)

Colonisers used different strategies to oppress the colonized in their colonies. The colonized were the marginalized lot. Among the marginalized lot the women were doubly colonized. Bill Ashcroft in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* defines double colonization as “the term refers to the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male domination of patriarchy” (66). Women who tolerate their alterity in more than one way suffer from multiple oppressions like sexual assaults and objectification of their bodies. This paper will focus on the traumatic experience of Geraldine, a native American woman who is sexually assaulted by a White in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*.

North, Dakotan bred Louise Erdrich traces in *The Round House* a very compelling story about a rape case which leads to a real trauma for a Ojibwe family of 3; the father Basil Coutts, a tribal judge, the raped mother Geraldine Coutts, a tribal enrollment specialist and their 13 year old son Joe Coutts. The novel *The Round House* is set in 1988 on a Chippewa Reservation. Geraldine Coutts' rape and the consequent search for justice constitutes the central plot of the novel.

According to the testimony of Geraldine, the rape happened somewhere in the vicinity of the Round House, a place where the members of the native community secretly held religious ceremonies during the era when they were not allowed to practice their chippewa spirituality. Initially Geraldine is tight lipped about the rape. After a traumatic silence she breaks it. Geraldine's son reveals,

My mother raised herself in bed... she began to retch... she turned to my father, staring out of the covers as out of a cave. Her eyes were black, black in her gray face. She spoke in a low, harsh voice that grew large between my ears. I was raped, Basil. My father did not move, did not take her hand or comfort her now in anyway. He seemed frozen. (Erdrich 158)

It was through the attack on the power of native woman that the disempowerment of the first nations had been achieved. This dehumanizing process was one of the cruelest on the face of this earth. Joe, the narrator further tells how even in those tormentful days the women were attacked. He tells, "Nanapush saw his people starve and die out, then his mother was attacked as wiindigoo but the men could not kill her." (184). Isabella J. Baxter in her article "Oppression, Sexual Violence and their Effects on Native American Women" reiterates, "This sexual violence erodes pride in the indigenous identity, especially for indigenous women, for when a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native" (8).

Through such violent attacks the entire core family systems is shattered. The violence on Native women impairs the integrity of the entire family. The entire family is affected by the assault of Geraldine. First Geraldine is heavily traumatized by the rape. The attack has a devastating effect on her. Joe exclaims,

But now my mother flushed darkly and an almost imperceptible shudder coursed over her. She took a gasping breath and put her hand to her wounded face... Her steps were soundless. She seemed to float... I think as we watched her we both had the sense that she was ascending to a place of utter loneliness from which she might never be retrieved. (Erdrich 43)

The fear that Geraldine Coutts experiences after the rape collapses her entire physical, mental and emotional system. Joe narrates,

And I looked at her. But she was not all right. There were scrapes of blows and the awful lopsidedness. Her skin had lost its normal warm colour... Her lips were seamed with dried blood... I tried to stroke her wrapped wrist and cold, dry fingertips. With a cry, she snatched her hand away as though I'd hurt her. She went rigid and closed her eyes. (10)

To substantiate the pangs of rape Susan Brownmiller in her ground breaking work *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* writes that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (4)

Geraldine's husband Bazil and Joe also are in anguish. The calm scene of a Sunday afternoon showing Bazil and Joe working in the garden is suddenly changed and the serene atmosphere rapidly transforms when the husband son see seriously hurt Geraldine. The violent attack against Geraldine is frightening, Joe shares his agony,

I could see it too in the set of her body – something fixed, rigid, wrong... she was silent... bleeding lips with the tip of her tongue. I saw her blink, a little frown. Her face was beginning to swell... She vibrated with a steady shudder... A strong smell rose from her, the vomit and something else, like gas or Kerosene... her blood was on me (Erdrich 7).

The alarming state of Geraldine's injuries shatters Joe. Joe wanted to see his mother as fresh as she used to be, he says,

Her serene reserve was gone – a nervous horror welled across her face. The bruises had come out and her eyes were darkly limned like a raccoon's. A sick Greek pulsed around her temples. Her jaw was indigo. Her Eyebrows had always been so expressive of irony and love, but now were held tight by anguish. Two vertical lines, black as if drawn by a marker creased her forehead. Her fingers plucked at the quilt's edge. Sour! (23)

The image of Geraldine's beauty which her son longed for was vanishing from her. Joe is dramatically shocked by her changed physical appearance. The fact that Geraldine is so much affected by the rape, she cannot even stand the touch of her 13 year old loving son. Joe stunned, tells, "my mother was sunk in such heavy sleep that when I tried to throw myself down next to her, she struck me in the face. It was a fore arm back blow and caught my jaw, stunning me"(23). Geraldine's reactions are because of the grave consequences that have disturbed her psyche after that atrocious attack.

Joe again, witnesses his father's suffering after Geraldine's rape. Bazil laments "in all the years we've been married we have never once slept apart until now ...she is isolating herself even from Joe. Doesn't talk to anyone from work, of course. Won't see visitors, even her old friend from boarding school days, La Rose". (75). Geraldine gets frightened even when Bazil approaches her. Any unexpected human touch brought to her mind all the bad memories of the attack. Joe describes, "I heard a splintering crash. And then a keen, low, anguished cry. My father was standing a few feet before her with his hands out vainly groping in air the shape of her, as if

to hold her without holding her. Between them on the floor lay a smashed and oozing casserole.(42). Bazil is totally degenerated by Geraldine's reluctance to express affection and love.

The law also fails them, because the precise location of Geraldine's attack remains unresolved. Linden Lark(the rapist) chose to commit his assault very near to the Round House, because of the intersection of three types of land jurisdiction: tribal, state and federal. If the matter was delegated to the tribal police they do not possess the authority to try such non-Indian major crimes. The state and federal jurisdiction's investigation is highly ineffective as they do not want to deal with it. It is true with the words of Bazil Couttes, "three classes of land meet there, my father said. His voice pulled tight with fear. Tribal trust, state and fee"(160). Thereby the rapist deliberately manages to evade justice.

The Round House is not only a story of victimization and suffering, but it is also a story of Native American resistance and survival, too. Although Geraldine Coutts is battered, she slowly recovers and endures. Geraldine is like the Athenian princess Philomela in Greek mythology raped and deprived of her tongue by her brother-in-law Tereus. Bazil Coutts a tribal judge and Joe Coutts by becoming a lawyer continue to resist the disenfranchisement of their tribe.

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