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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Sexual Violence in Native
American Communities: Louise
Erdrich's *The Round House*

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Abstract

By means of the data provided by the Amnesty International USA's report *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women From Sexual Violence in the USA*, this essay focuses on Native American women as victims of a kind of sexual violence deeply rooted not only in the aftermath of colonialism, but also in the discriminatory practices still present in the legal system of the United States of America. Through an analysis of the character of Ojibwe mother and rape survivor Geraldine Coutts in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House*, I will explore the impunity of the perpetrators of the crime, the result of a lack of tribal sovereignty and jurisdiction over cases of sexual assault. I will also explore how such aggression often leads to the traumatic disruption of the indigenous individual, family, and community.

Key Words

Native American, women, sexual violence, *The Round House*, Erdrich, tribal law, indigenous sovereignty, motherhood, cultural studies, Native American literature

Resumen

Partiendo de los datos proporcionados por el informe de Amnistía Internacional EEUU *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women From Sexual Violence in the USA*, este Trabajo se centra en las mujeres nativo-americanas como víctimas de un tipo de violencia sexual profundamente arraigada en las secuelas del colonialismo y en las prácticas discriminatorias aún presentes en el sistema legal de los Estados Unidos. A través del análisis de Geraldine Coutts, madre Ojibwe, víctima de violación y protagonista de la novela de Louise Erdrich *The Round House*, el presente proyecto explora la impunidad de los violadores derivada de la falta de soberanía y jurisdicción tribales sobre los casos de agresión sexual, y revela cómo tales agresiones a menudo conducen a la traumática transformación del individuo, la familia y la comunidad indígenas.

Palabras clave

Nativo-americano, mujeres, violencia sexual, *La Casa Redonda*, Erdrich, justicia tribal, soberanía indígena, maternidad, estudios culturales, literatura nativo-americana

*Aqués que ten fama de honrados na vila
roubáronme tanta brancura que eu tiña,
botáronme estrume nas galas dun día,
a roupa de cote puñéronma en tiras.*

Rosalía de Castro, “A Xustiza Pola Man”

Table of contents	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Mother in <i>The Round House</i>	2
2.1 The Indigenous Mother as Symbol of Resistance	3
3. Tribal Sovereignty and Jurisdiction.....	4
3.1 The Impunity of Sexual Crimes on the Reservation.....	6
4. The Traumatic Aftermath of Sexual Assault: Joe Coutts	8
5. Conclusion	10
Works Cited	11

1. Introduction

More than one in three Native American or Alaska Native women will be raped at some point of their lives according to the 2007 report by Amnesty International *Maze of Injustice*. Survivors rarely seek justice due to the inaction and indifference they face from law enforcement, which leads to a kind of impunity that systemically perpetuates violence against indigenous women. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) Movement emerges out of this epidemic of brutality affecting indigenous peoples across North America. Among other causes, MMIW fights for the end of such atrocities and advocates for awareness on the issue, which is typically ignored by Canadian and American governments. Native American women, who are more than twice as likely to suffer from sexual violence than any other sector of the population, are found at the center of *The Round House*, written by indigenous author Louise Erdrich. The novel deals with the lives of Geraldine and Bazil Coutts, who live on an Ojibwe reservation along with his soon-to-be teenager son Joe in North Dakota. Set in the 1980s, *The Round House* uses Geraldine's brutal rape at the hands of a white man to describe the barriers encountered by indigenous women not only in their daily lives, but also when trying to stand up for themselves in the name of justice. The novel noticeably illustrates the trauma endured by victims of abuse and their loved ones. The aggression permanently disrupts the life of the Coutts and serves as a catalyst for Joe's traumatic process of coming of age. This paper will focus on the role played by the character of Geraldine Coutts as a representation of Native American women who, because of their situation of inequality and the implications of tribal law, suffer higher rates of sexual violence.

2. The Mother in *The Round House*

The figure of the mother is central to all the events taking place in *The Round House*. The unsettling absence of Geraldine in the first pages foreshadows that something is not right. Chapter One begins with her son Joe's description of "small trees" attacking his parents' house "at the foundation", the roots of which had penetrated the cement (Erdrich 3). Like these seedlings, violence will soon break through the walls of the Coutts' home and permanently tear apart their family structure. As explained by Skenandore, "Erdrich establishes the centrality of women in the novel, presenting them as significant human beings who hold the world together and whose wellness measures the health of the world" (5). When Geraldine's life is disrupted by the attack, so are the lives of the members of her family. Once her absence becomes more evident, Joe himself states: "Women don't realize how much store men set on the regularity of their habits. We absorb their comings and goings into our bodies, their rhythms into our bones" (Erdrich 6). Nonetheless, it should be noted that what leads Geraldine to confront Linden Lark's violence is her desire to protect Mayla Wolfskin, who is also a mother to a baby girl and an Ojibwe tribal member. Mayla became pregnant by Curtis Yeltow, a fictional white senator of South Dakota, while she was an intern in his office, and later received a generous amount of money to keep the pregnancy a secret. Linden Lark, a white man with a violent past who also worked in the capitol, developed an insane obsession with Mayla. Not only does the public demonstration of her pregnancy represent a risk for the reputation of Yeltow, but it also jeopardizes her own safety due to Lark's jealous, obsessive behavior. As a tribal record specialist, Geraldine uses her power to confidentially help Wolfskin enroll her child as a member of the tribe. Nonetheless, the reader can see how as an Ojibwe mother, she does so with the purpose of safeguarding the subsistence of her people. When Lark finds out about the child, he attacks both women out of jealousy and

states that “the strong should rule the weak” (Erdrich 189), imitating the racist discourse that perpetuates inequality between Natives and whites. Geraldine’s characterization as a mother and female tribal enrollment specialist denotes the subversive role of the indigenous woman within the family and the community.

2.1 The Indigenous Mother as Symbol of Resistance

The mother in *The Round House* is “unkillable” (Erdrich 368) and serves as an essential nurturer of the family, the community, and the environment in which she finds herself. Wong explains that “a mother is not merely one’s biological parent; she is all one’s relations (male and female, human and animal, individual and tribal)” (177). Erdrich reflects deeply upon the importance of such role in indigenous communities. One good example of the essentiality of mothers in Ojibwe tradition and moral system is the Buffalo Woman story that is told to Joe. Narrated by Mooshum (Anishinaabe for ‘grandfather’), the story explains how Akiikwe, a mother with the ability to see where to find food in her dreams, is said to have been possessed by the Wiindigoo, a human-eating spirit, after not being able to feed her family during Winter season. Her son Nanapush is tasked with her murder and seems to refuse to carry it out at first, since “she was a good mother to her children and had taught them how to live” (Erdrich 212). After submerging her in a lake in the third failed attempt to end her life, Nanapush is told by his mother to go find “the Buffalo Woman” (Erdrich 218). When he finds the animal, he eats pieces of her meat and hides in between her ribcage to protect himself from the cold. In his sleep, Nanapush ends up becoming a buffalo himself. The old Buffalo Woman “adopt[s] [him] and [tells] him all she [knows]” (Erdrich 218), and instructs him to build the Round House, the place where Geraldine is later raped, so that Native people can practice their religion freely in times of spiritual prosecution by white authorities. As Carden explains, the “associative links Erdrich draws between Geraldine

Coutts and Buffalo Woman simultaneously demonstrate that Native resistance to the deadly logic of colonial domination also continues into the present, promising to preserve, strengthen, and extend the cultural sovereignty of tribal nations” (96). Through the stories of both the Buffalo Woman and Geraldine, the author shows how within Native communities, the continuation of culture relies heavily on the mother. Martínez-Falquina argues that “the vindication of a Native female identity is very much related to the question of motherhood: for these women, being a mother equals being a leader, for it implies a responsibility towards the future, a means to ensure survival, the personal becoming then political” (229). Women, and more specifically mothers, not only play a crucial role in the novel as vehicles of morality, but they also serve as an example of how centuries of colonialism have erased their relevance within the global community, leading them to become vulnerable targets of violence.

3. Tribal Sovereignty and Jurisdiction

Mayla Wolfskin’s apparently statutory rape and violent death and Geraldine Coutts’ assault stand for symbols of the unfairness of tribal justice in the US, since both unprosecuted cases embody the result of a failed system that perpetually dismisses the crimes suffered by indigenous peoples, and especially, those suffered by Native American women. After being brutally assaulted, Geraldine falls into a deep depressive state that prevents her from sharing her testimony with law enforcement. Her family will put the pieces of the crime together in order to find Geraldine’s rapist. In the process, Erdrich brings attention to the intricacies of law in Native American reservations. The first white settlers in North America saw Native American tribes as “legitimate political entities that could negotiate with European colonial powers through treaties” (Dimitrova-Grajzl 132). These first treaties granted sovereignty to indigenous peoples and allowed them to exercise their own jurisdiction. However, the Indian

Removal Act of 1830 and consequent Trail of Tears forced relocation upon many tribes westward of the Mississippi River and the reservation system as we know it was created. The power and control exerted by European settlers led treaties to gradually lose relevance. In *The Round House*, Mooshum angrily talks in his sleep: “Ah, those first reservation years, when they squeezed us! Down to only a few square miles. We starved while the cows of settlers lived fat off the fenced grass of our old hunting grounds” (Erdrich 216). The legal status of tribes shifted from sovereign to completely dependent upon the federal government. Joe also mentions several acts which stripped Native Americans from their rights as sovereign peoples, such as the Major Crimes Act of 1885 or the Public Law 280 of 1953, which enabled certain states to obtain jurisdiction over Indian lands and “[forbid] Indians from prosecuting whites on Indian land” (Matchie 356). Erdrich criticizes this “toothless sovereignty” (166) by introducing Geraldine’s husband as a helpless tribal judge. Additionally, the story is told from his son’s point of view, who, despite being a teenager completely unaware of the functioning of the law when the crime takes place, narrates the story after reaching adulthood and becoming part of law enforcement as well:

I wanted to know that whoever had attacked my mother would be found, punished, and killed. My father saw this. His fingers bit into my shoulders. We’ll get him, I said quickly. I was fearful as I said this, dizzy. Yes. He took his hands away. Yes, he said again. He tapped his watch, bit down on his lip. Now if the police would come. They need to get a statement. They should have been here. We turned to go back to the room. Which police? I asked. Exactly, he said. (Erdrich 16)

As Joe begins to comprehend the adult world surrounding him, he feels enraged by what his mother has experienced. His words are those of a young individual eager for “not vengeance but justice” (Erdrich 304). In contraposition, Bazil’s tone remains hopeless. As a tribal judge,

he knows that a case such as that of his wife is quite likely to go unprosecuted. Tharp points out that “*The Round House* testifies to the loss of tribal jurisdiction, which has directly affected the ability to protect Native women from sexual and domestic violence” (26). At this point, the location of the crime, as well as the identity and race of the perpetrator are unknown. Because of all this, Bazil is still unsure of whether tribal or federal law enforcement will take care of the judicial process if prosecuted.

3.1 The Impunity of Sexual Crimes on the Reservation

Rooted in colonialism, law in the United States has rendered women of color as “inherently impure and available for the taking” (Martínez-Falquina 119), hence perpetuating a crisis of sexual violence that is very palpable within the borders of indigenous reservations. Geraldine is raped by a white man in the Round House, where “three classes of land meet . . . tribal trust, state, and fee” (Erdrich 187). The investigation is hindered from the beginning. Not only does the writer cast light upon the issue of federal versus tribal jurisdiction, but she also emphasizes the impediments caused by the race of the perpetrator in the resolution of crimes committed against indigenous women. When able to share her story, Geraldine remembers Lark’s words: “I won’t get caught, he said. I’ve been boning up on law. Funny. Laugh . . . I know as much law as a judge . . . I have no fear” (Erdrich 189). Tribal law in particular “makes it difficult to protect all Native people from crimes committed against them by non-Indians, but the complications arising from combined sexism and racism make it even less likely that crimes against Native women will be tried.” (Tharp 26). The lack of Native sovereignty and jurisdiction give place to a vicious cycle of violence against Native women. As Erdrich explains in her article for the *New York Times* “Rape on the Reservation”, “one in three women is raped over her lifetime . . . Perhaps this is because federal prosecutors decline to prosecute 67 percent of sexual abuse cases . . . This gap has attracted sexual non-Indian

habitual sexual predators to tribal areas”. Because such crimes often go unpunished, they keep being committed. Lark feels entitled to the violations of Mayla Wolfskin and Geraldine for three main reasons. Firstly, because they are Native American women. Geraldine admits to hearing him say “I suppose I am one of those people who just hates Indians generally and especially for they were at odds with my folks way back but especially my feeling is that Indian women are – what he called us, I don’t want to say” (Erdrich 188). Secondly, because he is a white man and therefore his position in the social pyramid is above that of Native women; and thirdly, because this blend of racism and sexism allows him to take advantage of the loopholes in the law. His individual actions imitate the pattern of colonization. He takes over Mayla’s and Geraldine’s bodies in the same way settlers took over Native land. As explained by Skenandore: “Linden is not ashamed to admit that he hates Indigenous people and Indigenous women to extent that he studies the law so he can rape, colonize, and destroy with impunity both [Geraldine’s] body and her tribe’s body and their humanity” (6). Erdrich brings attention to the reality of unpunished sexual violence committed by white males on reservations by constructing a legal scenario that is directly affected by the 1978 Oliphant versus Squamish Indian Tribe court case, in which it was established that tribal courts have no jurisdiction over non-Natives unless Congress properly authorizes it (Mace 163). Nonetheless, as indicated by Amnesty International USA, “the US federal government has a legal responsibility to ensure protection of the rights and wellbeing of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples”, which is “set out in treaties between tribal nations and the federal government, further solidified in federal law, federal court decisions and policy” and it includes “the protection of the sovereignty of each tribal government” (2). These treaties are often broken. The confusion in the law as well as the time it takes to decide over who has the jurisdiction are some of the reasons why authorities fail to respond at all. In the novel, this is illustrated by how Geraldine’s case is not prosecuted and thereby not resolved, which eventually leads her

son Joe to draw on traditional Ojibwe morality and kill Linden Lark in order to achieve justice.

4. The Traumatic Aftermath of Sexual Assault: Joe Coutts

Erdrich hints at the trauma suffered by Geraldine's son by establishing his grown-up self as a narrator. Joe's coming of age unfolds gradually throughout the novel. As explained by Ibarrola-Armendariz, *The Round House* focuses "on the aftermath that a sexual crime has on the tender psyche of an Indian boy of thirteen and on the answers he frenetically angles for to put an end to his mother's ordeal and his own suffering" (262). Disappointed by White Man's Law and not convinced by the Catholic moral code, Joe chooses to eliminate the Windigo himself. When he finally kills his mother's rapist, he loses the remaining innocence he had left. He states: "There is no going back. And whatever happens, I can take" (Erdrich 342). His entrance into adulthood is driven by the anger caused by the disturbing experiences endured by Geraldine. "The rage Joe develops toward Lark threatens to turn him into the type of male aggressor he despises and illustrates the varied devastations that a trauma like rape can visit on rape victims and those who care about them" (Szeghi 418). As a victim of not only trauma, but also of the loss of jurisdiction explained above, Joe follows a very common pattern. He goes from victim to victimizer in an attempt to fight his feelings of anger towards Linden Lark and in order to avenge his mother's name. As explained by Bloom, "a victim is both helpless and powerless, and ... helplessness is a noxious human experience. Human beings will do anything to avoid feeling powerless" (14). Joe regains power in the same way he lost it, through violence. However, after this incident, he chooses not to fall into a spiral of brutality and goes on to become a tribal judge like his father before him. There appears to be some reparation. Despite carrying a sentence "to endure" (Erdrich 371), neither Joe nor Geraldine seem to engage in permanent cycles typically affecting victims of trauma: Joe does not

resort to violence, and Geraldine does not resort to suicidality (Bryant-Davis et al. 345) or chemical dependency, which, according to Tharp, “is a reflection of her professional status, her intact nuclear and extended family support, and her inner resiliency” (30). The unity present within the Coutts family, as well as within the community contribute to the process of healing: Cappy helps Joe with the shooting, Linda is aware that Joe has killed her brother and chooses to ignore it, and both do so in the name of their own definition of justice. The life of the Coutts is changed forever. Nonetheless, as Martínez-Falquina explains:

The texts depict the traumatic experience of the male characters as one of overwhelming disconnection, which ignites the search for reconnection to self, community, and place in order to heal, and in both cases, the healing of the masculine self will be determined by the healing of the violated woman. (123)

Geraldine’s rape catapults Joe traumatically into adulthood, and he longs for the return of his “before-mother” while becoming aware that “this might not happen . . . Some warm part of her was gone and might not return” (Erdrich 227). His “before-mother” has disappeared, and so has his child-self: “And there was that moment when my mother and father walked in the door disguised as old people. . . At the same time, I found. . . I’d gotten old along with them. I was broken and fragile” (Erdrich). Joe’s coming of age will be characterized by the open wound that his mother’s rape has left, which will only heal once she is recovered as well. Nonetheless, Joe is unable to overcome the process of grieving for her “before-mother” and takes matters into his own hands by killing Linden Lark. As Butler argues, “when grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order” (30). Therefore, at the end of the novel, the reader is left with the question of

whether Geraldine's and Joe's recoveries have been truly plausible considering the traumatic aftermath of the assault and consequent killing of the aggressor.

5. Conclusion

By situating the assault of a middle-aged Native American woman at the center of the novel, Louise Erdrich shows the regular presence of such experiences in the lives of the members of the indigenous communities in the United States. As explained above, the mother is given a critical role in the novel in accordance with the one she plays in traditional North American aboriginal communities. Geraldine represents the caretaker, the nurturer of her family, the transmitter of Ojibwe values, the ensurer of indigenous continuity and future. When her character is altered by the brutality of sexual assault, she renders her family and her community orphans. A sense of hopelessness is perceived throughout the novel, which turns into powerlessness once the case of rape is established as non-prosecutable. Affected not only by historical and ongoing discrimination but also by the sexism and racism present on tribal law, the characters of the novel, like many Native families in the real world, struggle to achieve justice. Geraldine's loved ones are profoundly affected by the traumatic experience of not having an official culprit, and Joe, as he enters into maturity, tries to take control of the situation. By drawing on traditional Ojibwe morality, he shoots his mother's rapist, making his loved ones carry a sentence for life but also regaining the power they had lost. A story of suffering but also of healing, *The Round House* serves as a fictional example of the systemic injustice and trauma endured by many Native American women and families.

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