



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue.1. 2025 (Jan-March)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Western Power Politics and Its Effects on the Ojibwe Tribes in Louise
Erdrich's *The Round House*

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.1.62](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.1.62)



Article information

Article Received:03/02/2025
Article Accepted:25/02/2025
Published online:11/03/2025

ABSTRACT

The research paper aims to explore the ways Louise Erdrich explicates White settlers' power and oppressive forces shaping the narrative, impacting Indigenous characters, and reflecting historical injustices in her novel *The Round House*. This paper references Iris Marion Young's Theory of Oppression, examining how historical colonization has harmed Indigenous populations and cultures. It also highlights Western supremacy over Native American people as a unique instance in this novel and analyses it from the postcolonial standpoint and theory of oppression.

Keywords: Native American, Colonialism, Chippewa, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Oppression, Violence.

Introduction

Louise Karen Erdrich is an accomplished Native American writer. Her works tell a complex web of stories about the Native people's identities, communities, societies, cultures, and humanity. She is regarded as a prominent modern Native American writer, and her well-edited works also reflect the Chippewa people of Turtle Mountain and European American heritage. Her contextualization is what makes it noteworthy. Because of her storytelling style, her characters are frequently likened to those of William Faulkner. She successfully combines historical accounts into her writing, as seen by her body of work. She desires to preserve Native American culture by documenting historical narratives in the oral tradition.

The Round House

The novel *The Round House* reveals the brutal realities of institutionalized injustice, the lasting impact of federal Indian policy in the United States, and the ongoing struggle for tribal security, sovereignty, and self-determination. Louise Erdrich is widely recognized for her writing of multiple

narrations, but however, *The Round House* stands out for having just one narrator. This novel is unique for its clear political presentation of the intricacies involved in the tribal legal system and reservation life of Native Americans in the late twentieth century. Setting of the novel is in the year 1988 on an Ojibwe territory and it is divided into 11 chapters. The protagonist of the novel is Joe Coutts a 13 year old boy who leads a carefree life at the beginning but when his mother was brutally attacked by Linden Lark a white man that shattered his family totally.

Joe Coutts' mother, Geraldine, works as a tribal record keeper; her duty is to maintain everybody's secrets. She was raped and attacked by a white man, Linden Lark, when she tried to stop him from obtaining a file that contained personal data about a young Indian girl, Mayla Wolfskin. After this incident, his mother isolated herself in her home and neglected to eat and chat with family members. Joe Coutts, seeks help from his three teenage friends - Cappy, Angus, and Zack. He searches along with his friends to discover the evidence in the scene of the crime to identify the attacker. After the serious effort, Joe identifies the crime occurred by a non-Native guy who took Geraldine to a place near the sacred ceremonial structure *Round House*, where the novelist receives his title.

Joe and Bazil are pursuing justice, but their case keeps encountering obstacles. Joe and Bazil decide to put the case together themselves after becoming frustrated with the ineptitude of the judiciary. In his slumber, Joe's grandfather Mooshum relates a traditional folk tale about *Wiindigoo* justice, or the duty to murder a *Wiindigoo* - a Chippewa creature that consumes human flesh. His story gives a hint to Joe for revenge, and he goes to the overlook every day and watches for Linden. On a determined day, Linden shows up, and Joe descends the hill with the rifle to prepare for his shot. Joe shoots Linden in the stomach, botching the job, and then freezes. Suddenly, Cappy comes up behind Joe, takes the rifle out of his hands, and shoots Linden dead. The novel ends with a somber and reflective note. Though Joe Coutts earns a sense of personal justice for his mother, the conclusion raises doubts on the ramifications of his deeds and if they actually result in peace or resolution.

Colonization

Colonization is the process of creating colonies by enslaving and exploiting people in order to force them to adopt the laws, values, and culture of the colony. Robert Young, in his book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), states that colonialism "involved an extraordinary range of different forms and practices carried out with respect to radically different cultures, over many centuries" (Robert 17). In his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", Chinua Achebe asserts that "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality" (Achebe 252). The European invasion and its settlement have devastated much of the indigenous people, moving destitute areas by treaty or removal of the indigenous people. Numerous researchers, including anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, and others, have worked to comprehend and elucidate the effects of colonization on the Native Americans of North America. They have understood the impact of cultural devastation, forced assimilation, and discrimination in various ways on Native people. They still experiences legal and cultural violence as a result of their society's legitimization of prejudice and hatred.

Iris Marion Young - Theory of Oppression

Iris Marion Young is the most influential political theorist; she has a considerable influence on a wide range of theories, such as democratic theory, feminist theory, and specifically justice. Her work is heavily influenced by a variety of Continental schools of thought, including as critical theory, phenomenology, post structuralism, and existentialism. Iris Marion Young published the remarkable work *Justice and the Politics of Difference* in 1990. In this book, he explicated that exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence are the "Five Faces of Oppression"

(Young 39). Moreover, he elucidates oppression as “the institutional constraint on self-development” and domination as “the institutional constraint on self-determination” (Young 37).

Young distinguishes Justice is not a distribution but the institutional condition that is necessary for the development and exercise of an individual's capacities. With this concept of justice, she explicates further that injustice refers to two forms of disabling constraints: oppression and domination. I.M.Young conceptualizes the traditional usages of oppression as tyranny by rulers, and in the modern usage of oppression, it is an injustice of suffering of people not because of colonial power alone but of well-intentioned liberal society.

This paper attempts to explore European imperialism, its oppression, and their enduring impact on various aspects of Native American life, as depicted in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House*.

European Power Politics and Its Oppressive Force in *The Round House*

Louise Erdrich highlights in her novel the Native Americans as victims of cultural, religious, and sexual violence that has strong roots in the colonial era and continues to exist in the American judicial system. The sexual violence against Native American women is more than twice that of any other group in the population. Her notable novel *The Round House* is deeply related to Amnesty International's Maze of Injustice report in 2007 that “more than one in three – will be raped during their lifetime; the comparable figure for the USA as a whole is less than one in five” (Rob). This paper tries to explicate the oppression encountered by Native people and its impact on the whole family from the perspective of Iris Marion Young's theory of oppression.

It also explores oppression, which Iris Marion Young illustrates through the “Five Faces of Oppression,” namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. This research specifically focuses on three types of oppression from Iris Marion Young's five faces of oppression: marginalization, powerlessness, and sexual violence, in Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House*. Her novel aims to grasp readers' attention on the huge injustice that occurs to Native American women on reservations still now even after the colonial period in the United States of America.

Oppression

This research aims to analysis how native people particularly women get oppressed in various way in the chosen novel *The Round House* by using Young's theory of oppression. The concept of oppression occurs when dominant people make others feel less human, or it can be explained as dehumanizing humans. People should be free without any constraint to live their lives in their own way, but oppression forces their lives and controls them. According to Young, “in dominant political discourse it is not legitimate to use the term oppression to describe our society, because oppression is the evil perpetrated by the Others.” (Young 41).

Powerlessness

Iris Marion Young explores the third form of oppression after exploitation and marginalization, which is powerlessness. People who are not allowed to hold any authority position are considered to be powerless, and they do not exercise power. Young states that “The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it” (Young 56). In the novel, Geraldine Coutts works as a tribal record keeper and her duty is to maintain everybody's secrets, She does her work in her reservation enrolment office. Though the story is narrated by her son Joe, the whole plot revolves around Geraldine Coutts because of her rape by Linder Lark, a white man at the Round House, which is the place where Ojibwe people do religious rituals and ceremonies.

The place is a highly honored place for the native people in North Dakota. Joe Coutts tries to find evidence for the crime to identify the attacker with the help of his friends. Basil Coutts, husband of

Geraldine, who works as a tribal judge, though he does official justice for natives at tribal court, does not get justice for his own wife's problem due to jurisdictional issues in the United States of America. U.S. Supreme Court issued its 1978 decision in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Tribe* as following: "Indian tribal courts do not have inherent criminal jurisdiction to try and to punish non-Indians, and hence may not assume such jurisdiction unless specifically authorized to do so by Congress" (*Oliphant v. Suquamish Tribe* 435). This U.S law makes clear understanding of Indians inability to take revenge or get justice for crime occurred to Native woman. The case is unquestionably the most detrimental legal precedent for the plot of this novel since it essentially seized from tribal courts all authority to try non-Indians. Even though the victim's husband is a tribal judge, he becomes powerless in that situation only because of white settlers' dominance in the novel.

Marginalization

Another important form of oppression is Marginalization from five faces of Young's theory of oppression. Young argues that "Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination" (Young 53). When white people first arrive in America, they become avaricious and intend to influence native people in order to eventually take control of their resources and territory. Racial genocide was committed in order to gain unrestricted access to the new territory, and they employed a variety of tactics to eradicate the Indian population, including the legal extermination of Indians. Julie Tharp, a researcher in his article, states that 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). Louise Erdrich tries to show the world this extermination of natives by the American legal system in this novel, *The Round House*, from the character Judge Bazil Coutts. When he fails to get justice due to the legal jurisdiction, he shares his anger and pain about these legal systems with his son Joe Coutts in the novel. Erdrich asserts her views on settlers from the character Judge Bazil Coutts as follows:

Even to this day, his words are used to continue the dispossession our lands. But what particularly galls the intelligent person now is that the language he used survive in the law, that we savages living of the forest. And to leave our land to us was to leave useless wilderness, that character and religion is of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy and on and on. (Keyreporter)

There is other evidence that demonstrates how judicial authority denied indigenous people justice in this way. Erdrich brings to the reader's attention that when Judge Bazil Coutt seriously scrutinizes the case files, he notices a reference as, "The defendants claimed that the tribal court did not have personal jurisdiction over the transactions, which were the basis for the plaintiff's complaint" (RH 49).

Sexual Violence

The final form of oppression is Sexual violence from the Young's five faces of Oppression. European settlers tactically use sexual violence against Native women as a weapon to oppress them to control them over their land and resources. The violence that Young is alluding to is systemic violence, in which members of particular social groups spend their everyday lives in constant danger of being attacked because they belong to that group. For example, just by virtue of being female, women are vulnerable to rape or physical abuse.

In this novel, Erdrich sheds light on how violence played a significant role, particularly sexual violence against Native women, which prevailed throughout the plot of the novel from the central character Geraldine and another important character, Mayla Wolfskin, who was raped and killed by

Linden Lark, a non-Indian. Erdrich portrays Lindan Lark as a white cannibalistic man; he is considered skin of evil by his sister Linda Wishkob herself, says as, "even though she knew by then he was skin of evil" (RH 241). Geraldine Coutts' assault and Mayla Wolfskin's statutory rape symbolize the unfairness of tribal justice in the U.S. because the aforementioned unprosecuted cases represent the outcome of an ineffective system that consistently ignores the crimes committed against Native American women.

The novel reflects the extreme agony of native women in the hands of Linden Lark, a skin of evil. At the beginning of the novel, Geraldine was raped and attempted to be murdered by him because she had Mayla Wolfskin's secret about her baby. Once she came to meet Geraldine for the purpose of registering her baby in a tribal reservation, she later made a call to Geraldine that "I need that file, she said, my life depends on that file" (RH 160). After this call, Geraldine went to her office with the file Mayla asked for. When she reached there, Mayla was tied by him. "She was thrown on the ground; her hands were taped up behind her. The baby crawled over the dirt floor" (RH 160). He had Mayla bound and gagged. She and the other person exchanged a glance- Mayla didn't blink, only shifted her eyes between her baby and them back again. It was clear what she meant. She was entrusting her child to them. With a subtle nod, they acknowledged her silent plea.

Then Geraldine escapes from him while he was searching for another book of matches and he threatens her as, "if you move an inch I will kill this baby and if you move an inch I will kill Malya" (RH 162). The story ends with Joe getting a hint from his grandfather Mooshum's traditional story and deciding to get rid of the Wiindigoo by himself. He loses the last of his innocence when he murders the person who raped his mother. The reader is left wondering at the book's conclusion if Geraldine and Joe's recovery was actually believable in light of the horrific events that followed the assault and the attacker's subsequent murder. Through her novel *The Round House*, She shows the White settlers dominance on Native people still exists and she finds a way to get rid of the evilness.

Conclusion

Since European settlers arrived first in the land, the oppression continues to exist on indigenous people without the awareness of dominant society because of white supremacy, whether consciously or unconsciously. Louise Erdrich illustrates the frequent occurrence of such incidents in the lives of U.S. indigenous people by placing the assault of Native American woman at the novel's core. *The Round House* serves as an example of the injustice endured by many Native American women and families. The novel stands as an apt example of understanding different forms of oppression from the theory of oppression by Iris Marion Young. Through characters like Geraldine and Mayla Wolfskin, Erdrich sheds light on white settlers' supremacy over Indigenous people in the United States of America.

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