

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Bearing the Weight: Motherhood and the Echoes of Trauma in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This paper explores the representation of motherhood and trauma in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012), with particular attention to the impact of gendered violence on familial relationships and individual identity within Native American communities. It situates the novel within broader conversations on trauma, motherhood, and Indigenous literature.

**Methods:** Utilizing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and narrative analysis, the study conducts a close reading of key scenes in the novel, focusing on the aftermath of Geraldine Coutts's assault and its ripple effects on her role as a mother and on the cohesion of the Coutts family. **Results:** The analysis reveals that Erdrich disrupts conventional representations of motherhood by embedding personal trauma within systemic patterns of legal failure and cultural marginalization. The maternal figure is shown to be both silenced and symbolically central to communal endurance. The novel portrays healing as a collective, culturally rooted process rather than an individualized journey. **Discussion:** These findings demonstrate how *The Round House* critiques institutional injustice while affirming the resilience of Native communities through intergenerational solidarity and shared narrative. By foregrounding the intersections of personal suffering and historical violence, the novel reframes trauma as a site of both rupture and cultural continuity. **Conclusion:** This study contributes to trauma and literary studies by showing how Indigenous narratives like Erdrich's reposition motherhood and healing within communal and cultural frameworks, challenging dominant Western paradigms of individual recovery and maternal identity.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Gendered Violence, Trauma, Native American.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012) offers a profound exploration of the intersections between gendered violence, familial relationships, and cultural identity within Native American communities. The novel set in 1980s on a reservation in North Dakota, mainly focuses on thirteen-year-old Joe Coutts as he grapples with the brutal assault of his mother, Geraldine. Through Joe's perspective, Erdrich portrays the cascading effects of sexual violence, not only on individual survivors but also

on the fragile fabric of family life. In doing so, the novel foregrounds the multiple layers of trauma experienced by Native American women and the legal and cultural systems that continue to fail them.

The Novel is the depiction of motherhood under the weight of trauma. Geraldine's physical and emotional withdrawal following her assault disrupts the nurturing role traditionally associated with maternal figures. Rather than presenting motherhood as a site of unconditional strength, Erdrich portrays it as deeply

vulnerable to the ruptures of violence. Geraldine's struggle to maintain emotional connection with her son reflects broader historical patterns of disruption within Native communities, where colonial violence, systemic racism, and legal neglect have historically targeted women's bodies and roles. This study examines how Erdrich challenges idealized depictions of motherhood by portraying it through the lens of trauma, silence, and fragmentation.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this paper approaches *The Round House* through the lens of narrative disruption and emotional paralysis. Caruth posits that trauma defies simple representation, instead manifesting through gaps, silences, and compulsive repetitions in storytelling. Applying this framework illuminates how Erdrich structures her novel around fractured communication, emphasizing the difficulty of articulating and processing traumatic experiences. Geraldine's silence, Joe's obsessive search for answers, and the family's collective withdrawal all serve as narrative embodiments of unresolved trauma. In this way, Erdrich not only portrays the psychological aftershocks of violence but also critiques the legal and societal structures that perpetuate cycles of harm within Native American communities.

Beyond personal suffering, Erdrich's novel addresses the systemic failures that render justice elusive for Indigenous women. The complex jurisdictional challenges faced by Native communities, where tribal, state, and federal authorities overlap and often conflict, are vividly illustrated through Geraldine's case. Erdrich exposes the ways in which legal inadequacies compound personal trauma, highlighting the broader political dimensions of gendered violence. This emphasis aligns with scholarship on Native American feminism, which stresses the inseparability of personal and political experiences in understanding Indigenous women's lives.

This paper therefore aims to analyze how *The Round House* positions motherhood within the intersecting frameworks of personal trauma and systemic injustice. Through close textual analysis and engagement with trauma theory, it investigates how Erdrich redefines motherhood as a site marked by vulnerability, resistance, and cultural continuity. In doing so, the novel contributes to a richer understanding of how trauma reshapes not only individuals but also communal structures and identities. This research is based on the following hypothesis: Geraldine Coutts's portrayal as a traumatized mother challenges traditional Western ideals of maternal strength by illustrating the psychological and relational disruptions caused by gendered violence. Meanwhile analysing the narrative structure of the novel's characteristics of trauma

literature as defined by Cathy Caruth. The research also reflects the central concerns of the article with the following research questions.

1. How does Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* portray the psychological and narrative effects of trauma, particularly through the character of Geraldine Coutts?
2. In what ways does the novel challenge conventional representations of motherhood by situating it within the context of personal and historical trauma?
3. How does the novel represent healing and resilience as communal processes rooted in Indigenous cultural practices rather than individualized psychological recovery?
4. How does Joe Coutts's emotional development reflect the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the complexities of masculinity under conditions of systemic injustice?

Ultimately, by centring Native women's experiences of violence and survival, Erdrich crafts a narrative that demands a re-evaluation of justice, healing, and resilience. This study seeks to demonstrate that *The Round House* is not merely a story of personal tragedy but a critical intervention into ongoing conversations about historical trauma, survival, and the endurance of Indigenous familial bonds in the face of relentless adversity.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Native American literature has increasingly emphasized the intersection of gender, trauma, and cultural identity, highlighting how Indigenous authors confront colonial histories and ongoing systemic violence. Early foundational work, such as Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), established the critical importance of Indigenous women's experiences, particularly the ways colonialism disrupted traditional matriarchal structures and communal relationships. Allen argues that the erasure of women's central roles within Native societies profoundly reshaped familial dynamics, a disruption reflected in contemporary Native narratives. Her insights provide an essential backdrop for understanding Louise Erdrich's portrayal of fractured motherhood in *The Round House*.

Contemporary scholars have expanded upon Allen's foundation by exploring how trauma shapes Native American storytelling. Nancy J. Peterson's *Against Amnesia* (2001) examines how Native American authors employ narrative strategies to resist historical erasure and testify to collective suffering. Peterson underscores the importance of memory and narrative recovery in

healing from intergenerational trauma. Erdrich's novel, with its fragmented storytelling and emphasis on silences, resonates with Peterson's view that narrative gaps and ruptures are deliberate acts of resistance, signalling unhealed wounds and persistent injustices.

Scholars such as Sarah Deer have contributed crucial insights into the material realities faced by Native women. In *The Beginning and End of Rape* (2015), Deer exposes the jurisdictional labyrinth that often denies Indigenous women legal protection from sexual violence. Deer's work highlights the specific legal frameworks that leave survivors like Geraldine Coutts vulnerable and largely without recourse. By situating Geraldine's experience within this broader legal context, Erdrich underscores the political as well as personal nature of trauma.

Further, scholars like Lisa Tatonetti, in *The Erotics of Sovereignty* (2014), argue that contemporary Native literature reclaims bodily autonomy and challenges colonial narratives of victimhood. Tatonetti's framework of sovereignty as both political and personal informs a reading of *The Round House* wherein Geraldine's eventual tentative re-engagement with life signals not mere survival but an act of cultural resistance and reclamation.

Finally, Indigenous feminist scholars such as Kim Anderson (*A Recognition of Being*, 2011) and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's concept of historical trauma (1998) illuminate how collective and inherited traumas shape maternal identities. Their work stresses that Indigenous women's maternal roles are both sites of profound vulnerability and resilience, shaped by centuries of colonial disruption. This duality is evident in Erdrich's portrayal of Geraldine as simultaneously broken by violence and enduring through her continued existence within her family and community.

In sum, existing research on Native American literature, trauma theory, and Indigenous feminism provides a rich framework for analyzing *The Round House*. However, this paper seeks to extend current conversations by focusing specifically on how Erdrich redefines motherhood within a trauma-saturated context, portraying it not simply as nurturing but as a complex, fractured, and resilient force shaped by personal and systemic violence.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Trauma Theory and Narrative Disruption

Understanding the impact of gendered violence on motherhood in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* requires a theoretical framework that addresses both the psychological dimensions of trauma and the socio-political realities of Indigenous women's lives. This study draws primarily on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and

Indigenous feminist scholarship, particularly the works of Kim Anderson and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, to illuminate how trauma disrupts personal identities, familial relationships, and cultural continuities.

Cathy Caruth's seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), asserts that trauma is not fully grasped at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly in disruptive, fragmented forms. According to Caruth, trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (p. 4), and thus reemerges through compulsive repetition, narrative gaps, emotional paralysis, and fractured temporality. In literary narratives, trauma often manifests not through coherent storytelling but through silence, fragmentation, and deferred articulation. Applying Caruth's insights to *The Round House* enables a reading of Geraldine's emotional withdrawal and Joe's obsessive pursuit of justice as symptomatic of unassimilated trauma. The novel's structure itself, marked by disrupted chronology and silence surrounding the traumatic event, mirrors the inexpressibility that Caruth identifies as central to traumatic experience.

However, trauma in *The Round House* is not solely a psychological phenomenon; it is deeply embedded within systemic structures of oppression. To fully grasp the novel's portrayal of motherhood under trauma, it is necessary to incorporate Indigenous feminist theories that foreground the collective and historical dimensions of violence against Native women. Kim Anderson's *A Recognition of Being* (2011) emphasizes that Indigenous womanhood and motherhood are constructed through both personal experiences and historical traumas stemming from colonization, displacement, and cultural disruption. Anderson argues that Indigenous mothers have historically served as bearers of cultural survival even as they have been targeted by colonial violence seeking to destabilize Native communities.

Similarly, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's concept of historical trauma (1998) frames the experiences of Indigenous peoples as cumulative, intergenerational wounds resulting from colonization, genocide, and systemic marginalization. Brave Heart contends that trauma is transmitted across generations, affecting not only those who directly experience violence but also their descendants. Within this framework, Geraldine's trauma is not an isolated event but part of a larger continuum of historical violence inflicted upon Native women. Her emotional paralysis and strained maternal relationship are thus both personal reactions and manifestations of collective suffering.

By integrating Caruth's trauma theory with Indigenous feminist perspectives, this study recognizes

trauma as both an internal, psychic disruption and an external, socio-historical force. This dual focus allows for a more nuanced analysis of *The Round House*, where motherhood is portrayed not simply as disrupted by individual suffering but as a site burdened by centuries of systemic violence. It also highlights the resilience inherent in Indigenous motherhood, as survival and cultural continuity persist even amid profound trauma.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework enables a reading of Erdrich's novel that accounts for the complexities of personal grief, historical injustice, and communal endurance, situating the characters' experiences within broader patterns of Indigenous resistance and survivance.

### 3.2 Motherhood and Trauma in Native American Literature

Motherhood in Native American literature is a multifaceted theme that draws on cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions unique to Indigenous peoples. This literature often reflects the complex portrayals of motherhood that interweave personal experiences with broader societal and communal narratives. Native American motherhood embodies the intricacies of cultural identity. Authors like Louise Erdrich and Joy Harjo explore the relationship between mothers and their children as a means of passing down traditions and cultural knowledge. Many narratives highlight the struggles of Indigenous mothers in a context marked by displacement and trauma. For example, in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the experiences of mothers are colored by the legacy of historical injustices faced by their communities.

The challenges faced by these mothers often catalyze broader discussions on identity and survival. In works by authors such as N. Scott Momaday, motherhood transcends the physical realm, reflecting deeper connections to nature and the cosmos. The maternal figure symbolizes nourishment and healing, not only for individual families but also for the community as a whole. The exploration of motherhood in Native American literature is essential for understanding the broader narratives of identity, resilience, and cultural continuity.

"Trauma theory, which emerged as an area of cultural investigation in the early 1990s, has become established due to its huge impact on literary theory" (Sevillano, 137). Integrating Motherhood and trauma is another crucial aspect explored within Native American literature. It reveals the dual struggles and resilience of Indigenous women in the face of historical and contemporary challenges. This theme is critical for understanding how maternal roles are shaped by traumatic experiences

and how these experiences influence the identities and futures of families and communities.

Dr. Kim Anderson in his *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* work, sheds light on the evolving dynamics of motherhood, emphasizing how contemporary Indigenous mothers navigate historical trauma while fostering strong identities (Anderson, 2011). The concept of historical trauma, introduced by researchers such as Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, elucidates how cumulative psychological scars affect generations of Indigenous people. The study shows that mothers are often at the forefront of coping with these traumas, seeking to instill resilience and cultural awareness in their sons amid adversity (Brave Heart, 1998).

### 3.3 Motherhood and Trauma in *The Round House*

Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012) is a poignant exploration of the historical and legal challenges faced by the Ojibwe community, particularly in relation to issues of jurisdiction, sovereignty, and justice. Set on a North Dakota reservation in the late 1980s, the novel centers on the sexual assault of an Ojibwe woman, Geraldine Coutts, and the resulting legal ambiguity that obstructs justice. This narrative reflects the real-world limitations placed on tribal courts by federal law, notably the Major Crimes Act of 1885, the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968, and the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* (1978), which ruled that tribal courts do not have jurisdiction over non-Native individuals. These policies have historically undermined tribal sovereignty and left Native victims, particularly women, vulnerable to violence with limited legal recourse (Deer, 2015). Through the character of Joe, Geraldine's adolescent son, Erdrich illustrates the personal and communal consequences of these systemic injustices, emphasizing the emotional burden carried by Indigenous youth growing up amidst unresolved historical trauma. Simultaneously, the novel foregrounds the resilience of Ojibwe cultural practices, including storytelling, kinship, and spirituality, which persist despite ongoing colonial pressures. Erdrich integrates elements of Ojibwe cosmology and community life to underscore the enduring strength of Native identity and resistance (Rainwater, 1999). In this way, *The Round House* serves as both a coming-of-age narrative and a profound commentary on the intersection of historical oppression, legal disenfranchisement, and cultural survival within Indigenous communities.

Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* intricately portrays motherhood as a site profoundly reshaped by trauma, demonstrating how sexual violence fractures familial bonds and redefines maternal roles within Native American communities. Through the character



of Geraldine Coutts, Erdrich explores the complexities of mothering in the aftermath of violence, revealing how trauma silences, isolates, and destabilizes traditional understandings of maternal care.

Following Geraldine's assault, her emotional withdrawal signals a profound disruption in her identity as a mother. Prior to the assault, Geraldine is depicted as a nurturing and a stabilizing figure in Joe's life, her daily routines providing structure and emotional security. However, after the traumatic event, her maternal presence becomes increasingly absent. Joe's observation, "She opened her eyes. Her eyes were black pits. She did not answer" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 140) captures not only Geraldine's psychological disintegration but also the emotional void that replaces nurturing care. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, helps to identify Geraldine's silence can be read as a manifestation of unassimilated trauma, which resists straightforward articulation and instead emerges through withdrawal and fragmented interactions.

Motherhood, traditionally framed within cultural narratives as a source of resilience and unconditional support, becomes in *The Round House* a fragile and ruptured space. Geraldine's inability to engage with Joe following her trauma reflects the emotional paralysis described by Caruth, where survivors become trapped between the moment of trauma and the impossibility of fully narrating or integrating the event into their lives. Geraldine's command to Joe, "You will leave me to think the way I want to think here" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 141) exemplifies the emotional barricades erected by trauma, highlighting how her maternal identity is no longer easily accessible either to herself or to her son.

Joe's response to his mother's withdrawal further illuminates the impact of trauma on familial relationships. His yearning for a return to the pre-trauma past, "With all my being, I wanted to go back to before all this had happened" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 118) reflects not only personal grief but also a broader cultural longing for stability disrupted by historical and contemporary violence. Joe's experience resonates with Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's concept of historical trauma, wherein individual suffering is entangled with collective, intergenerational wounds. Geraldine's trauma, therefore, is not isolated; it is a continuation of systemic violence that targets Indigenous women and undermines the familial structures central to cultural survival.

Moreover, Erdrich's portrayal complicates notions of resilience by showing that healing is neither immediate nor guaranteed. Geraldine's tentative steps toward reclaiming her maternal role such as her remark, "I should start cooking again" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 55) suggest that resilience, in this context, involves small, incremental

acts rather than dramatic recoveries. These moments of hesitant reconnection align with Indigenous feminist perspectives, which emphasize survival and cultural continuity amid persistent historical traumas.

Through Geraldine's fractured motherhood, Erdrich critiques both the personal devastation wrought by gendered violence and the systemic legal failures that leave Native women vulnerable. By situating maternal disruption within a broader framework of communal and historical trauma, *The Round House* reveals that motherhood under trauma is not a retreat into victimhood but a complex negotiation of pain, survival, and resilience.

### 3.4 Joe's Emotional Development and the Burden of Trauma

While Geraldine Coutts's trauma in *The Round House* visibly fractures the maternal role, the novel equally reveals how gendered violence profoundly reshapes her son Joe's emotional and moral development. In the absence of maternal nurturing and amid the legal system's failure to deliver justice, Joe undergoes a forced emotional maturation that is deeply entangled with grief, rage, and distorted notions of masculinity. Erdrich thus presents a complex portrait of boyhood traumatized by violence, illuminating how trauma can shape not only immediate relationships but also the internal construction of identity.

Joe's initial response to his mother's assault is characterized by helplessness and a yearning to restore a lost sense of security. His desperate wish to reverse time "I wanted to move back through time and stop her from returning to her office that Sunday" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 118) reflects the temporal dislocation Cathy Caruth identifies as central to trauma: the survivor becomes trapped in an unresolvable tension between past and present, meanwhile the impact is reflected on the family. Joe's longing is not merely personal nostalgia but symptomatic of an emotional rupture that leaves him unable to process the present fully.

As Geraldine withdraws emotionally, Joe's psychological isolation deepens. Deprived of maternal comfort, he increasingly seeks alternative sources of support, such as his grandfather Mooshum and his close group of friends. These relationships, however, offer only partial solace. The void left by his mother's emotional absence drives Joe to search obsessively for answers and ultimately to pursue a form of justice that replicates the violence he seeks to overcome. His covert investigations, described as "surreptitious reading" and careful observation (Erdrich, 2012, p. 69), mirror Caruth's notion that trauma often reemerges through compulsive and repetitive actions.

Joe's trajectory toward violence reflects not only his personal coping mechanisms but also broader cultural constructions of masculinity within a trauma-saturated environment. As legal avenues for justice collapse due to jurisdictional complexities, Joe internalizes the belief that direct, extra legal action is necessary to protect his mother and restore family honor. His ultimate decision to kill Linden Lark, the man responsible for Geraldine's assault marks a pivotal moment where trauma, vengeance, and distorted masculinity converge. Joe's reflection, "I was building lie upon lie and it all came naturally to me as honesty once had" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 393), captures the moral erosion trauma can engender when systemic injustice leaves young men without lawful paths to healing or protection.

This transformation is not depicted as heroic but as deeply tragic. Joe's act of violence alienates him from his father, a tribal judge committed to the rule of law, and disrupts any possibility of emotional closure. Yet, Erdrich suggests that this outcome is not merely a personal failure but a systemic one. By placing Joe's transformation against the backdrop of historical and legal neglect toward Native communities, the novel critiques the conditions that compel young Indigenous men to embody destructive forms of agency.

Furthermore, Joe's burden of trauma reflects intergenerational patterns of survival and loss familiar within Native American cultural contexts. As Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart theorizes, the emotional scars of colonial violence are transmitted across generations, shaping not only how individuals experience suffering but also how they interpret and perform resilience. Joe's actions, while morally compromised, emerge from a desperate attempt to protect familial bonds, an act of survival conditioned by a long history of betrayal by external legal structures.

In portraying Joe's emotional development as both a response to personal loss and a symptom of collective historical trauma, Erdrich deepens the novel's critique of systemic violence. Joe's shattered innocence and distorted masculinity reveal that trauma's reach extends beyond individual victims, embedding itself within familial and communal identities and complicating traditional narratives of growth, justice, and healing.

### 3.5 Healing and Resilience

Louise Erdrich's (2012) *The Round House* also offers a profound exploration of healing and resilience in the aftermath of violence. Set on an Ojibwe reservation, the novel illustrates how familial bonds, friendships, and cultural traditions act as vital forces of survival. Healing, for Erdrich's characters, is neither straightforward nor complete; rather, it is fraught, partial, and communal.

This aligns closely with Cathy Caruth's (1996) theories on trauma, which emphasize that healing involves narrating and reliving pain rather than simply overcoming it. Through its portrayal of familial solidarity, personal courage, and the stubborn persistence of life, *The Round House* presents a layered narrative of survival rooted in love and communal care.

Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" at the time it occurs (p. 4). Healing, she posits, is not about erasing trauma but finding ways to live beside it, often by re-narrating painful experiences. This concept is crucial for understanding Joe Coutts' family after Geraldine's assault. Rather than quickly returning to normalcy, Joe and his father endure a period of silent devastation. Joe reflects, "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, 2012, p. 5). The visceral disruption of everyday life highlights how trauma physically and spiritually unsettles its survivors.

The novel underscores the importance of collective healing. Joe's father's response to Geraldine's disappearance is immediate and active: "Let's go find her," he says (Erdrich, 2012, p. 6). The certainty in his language finds her, not looking for her reflects a refusal to succumb to despair. Friends, too, provide vital support. Joe's closest friend, Cappy, gifts him a "thunderbird egg" stone, which Joe touches whenever he feels vulnerable: "Every time I got a pitying or curious look from another kid or a teacher that day, I touched the stone Gappy gave me" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 25). These rituals reflect Caruth's (1996) assertion that survivors anchor themselves through objects and narratives that offer symbolic safety.

Healing, however, is neither immediate nor complete. Geraldine's physical wounds are treatable; her emotional isolation is more difficult to address. Joe observes, "She mounted the stairs... ascending to a place of utter loneliness from which she might never be retrieved" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 16). Erdrich captures the reality that survivors may retreat into spaces of sorrow that outsiders cannot access. Caruth (1996) similarly notes that trauma reconfigures survivors' relationships with time and memory, creating barriers between past and present selves.

Nonetheless, Erdrich presents small rituals and communal moments as essential to resilience. After a particularly dismal evening, Joe's family finds humor in a terrible meal: "Although the stew with its gagging undertone of rotted onion was so infernal that it cheered us up" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 43). This grotesque humor affirms the necessity of laughter and absurdity even in the face of devastation. Healing, as the novel shows, does

not meant forgetting or dismissing pain but learning to live with it.

Joe's maturation is shaped by an insistence on bearing witness and taking action. He tells his father, "We'll get him," a vow that is not simply about vengeance but about reclaiming agency (Erdrich, 2012, p. 18). Caruth (1996) emphasizes that survivors often attempt to find coherence and agency through action and narration. Joe's quest for justice, while imperfect and fraught, represents an effort to create meaning from tragedy.

Family and community support structures are also essential. When Joe visits Aunt Clemence, even their small, shared acts of defiance agreeing to "actively hate" an unpleasant painting become moments of solidarity (Erdrich, 2012, p. 23). Acts of emotional communion, even when seemingly trivial, help survivors re-knit the fabric of daily life torn apart by violence. Justice, too, is complicated in the novel. Joe's father insists that multiple jurisdictions take Geraldine's statement because it is unclear whether the crime falls under tribal, federal, or state law: "Each police officer went into the room with a notebook and a pen, and came out again in about fifteen minutes, expressionless" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 19). Healing, Erdrich suggests, requires not only personal support but structural and systemic justice—something not easily achieved.

Ultimately, Joe's survival, and that of his family, is not a return to a pre-trauma innocence but a movement forward, carrying the weight of experience. His father's words capture the novel's fundamental truth: "Very little is needed to make a happy life" (Erdrich, 2012, p. 92). Resilience, according to Erdrich and Caruth, involves not erasing the past but embracing life in its damaged, sacred fullness.

Through a nuanced portrayal of trauma and survival, *The Round House* affirms that healing is collective, messy, and ongoing. Louise Erdrich's powerful novel, enriched by Cathy Caruth's trauma framework, shows that resilience is not about forgetting, but about remembering together with tenderness, rage, humor, and fierce love.

#### 4. METHODS

Utilizing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and narrative analysis, this study undertakes a detailed examination of pivotal scenes in the novel, with a particular focus on the aftermath of Geraldine Coutts's assault. Caruth's trauma theory emphasizes the belatedness and incomprehensibility of traumatic experience, its resistance to full representation and its ongoing, recursive impact on survivors. Through this lens, Geraldine's trauma is not simply a singular past event but an ongoing presence that fractures time, language, and familial roles. The novel's narrative structure reflects this disorientation, revealing

how trauma lingers in silences, evasions, and fragmented recollections.

Geraldine's silence and emotional withdrawal post-assault reshape her identity as a mother, altering the way she engages with her son, Joe, and husband, Bazil. Her inability to articulate her experience creates a rupture in familial communication and trust. The narrative portrays her internal disintegration through symbolic distancing, highlighting how trauma isolates the survivor even from those closest to them. Geraldine's shifting behavior becomes a mirror for the broader disintegration of family cohesion, as each member internalizes their own version of her pain.

Through close reading of key scenes particularly those involving Geraldine's retreat from daily life, Joe's anxious surveillance, and Bazil's restrained patience—the study explores how trauma spreads beyond the individual, becoming a collective wound. Caruth's theory allows for a reading in which the trauma is not owned by a single character but is dispersed throughout the narrative, surfacing in the tensions, absences, and emotional ruptures that redefine the Coutts family. This approach underscores the ways in which trauma, left unspoken, can destabilize not just personal identity but also relational and communal structures, demanding new forms of narrative and emotional engagement to begin healing.

#### 5. RESULTS

The analysis reveals that Louise Erdrich disrupts conventional, often idealized representations of motherhood by embedding Geraldine's personal trauma within larger systemic patterns of legal failure, historical injustice, and cultural marginalization. In doing so, Erdrich challenges the notion of the mother as an always-nurturing, emotionally available figure. Instead, the maternal subject is portrayed as both silenced by her trauma and yet symbolically central to the survival and endurance of her Indigenous community. Geraldine's silence and withdrawal are not signs of weakness, but rather evidence of the profound psychological impact of both individual and collective trauma, exacerbated by a legal system that fails to deliver justice. At the same time, the novel redefines healing—not as a solitary, internalized process, but as one that is inherently communal and culturally embedded. It is through rituals, shared storytelling, and intergenerational resilience that the characters begin to restore fractured familial and communal bonds.

#### 6. DISCUSSION

The exploration of motherhood and trauma in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* reveals the profound interconnectedness between personal suffering,

familial destabilization, and systemic injustice within Native American communities. By analyzing both Geraldine Coutts's emotional withdrawal and Joe's moral disintegration, it becomes clear that gendered violence does not simply wound individuals it radiates outward, fracturing familial bonds, reshaping identity, and perpetuating cycles of historical trauma.

Erdrich's portrayal of Geraldine challenges idealized conceptions of motherhood as innately resilient or self-sacrificing. Instead, motherhood is depicted as a fragile and complex role, vulnerable to disruption by both personal violence and broader historical forces. Geraldine's silence and detachment are not failures of character but manifestations of trauma's insidious effects, resonating with Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma resists direct assimilation and emerges through fragmented narratives and emotional paralysis. In this way, *The Round House* contests dominant cultural narratives that frame maternal resilience as inevitable, highlighting instead the psychological toll that systemic violence extracts from Indigenous women.

At the same time, the novel interrogates constructions of masculinity shaped under the pressures of trauma and legal failure. Joe's progression from innocence to vengeful violence exemplifies how young Indigenous men, deprived of systemic support and community healing structures, may internalize distorted notions of strength and justice. His moral collapse, while tragic, is presented not as an individual failing but as a symptom of structural neglect. Erdrich's depiction aligns with Indigenous feminist and historical trauma scholarship, such as that of Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Kim Anderson, emphasizing that trauma within Native communities must be understood as cumulative and collective, rather than isolated or episodic.

Moreover, *The Round House* challenges Western individualistic models of trauma recovery, which often emphasize personal resilience or psychological healing in isolation. Instead, Erdrich foregrounds the importance of communal rituals, storytelling, humor, and everyday acts of survival as vital components of healing. Small moments of shared laughter, food preparation, and emotional solidarity between Joe, Bazil, and the larger community suggest that resilience emerges not through overcoming trauma in a linear fashion but through enduring it together, imperfectly yet persistently. This emphasis on collective endurance resonates with Indigenous cultural frameworks of survivance a concept articulated by Gerald Vizenor which celebrates active survival, resistance, and the continuation of cultural identity despite ongoing adversity.

Erdrich also critiques the legal structures that fail to protect Native women, exposing how jurisdictional

loopholes leave Indigenous communities particularly vulnerable to violence. The systemic failure to deliver justice to Geraldine reflects a broader historical pattern of colonial neglect and violence, underscoring that trauma within Native American contexts cannot be disentangled from political and legal disenfranchisement. By situating personal trauma within these systemic realities, Erdrich's narrative refuses to individualize or pathologize suffering; rather, it insists on a collective and historical understanding of both injury and resilience.

Thus, the novel compels a rethinking of motherhood, masculinity, justice, and healing in Native American literature. Motherhood is portrayed not merely as nurturing but as a site of both vulnerability and quiet resistance. Masculinity is revealed to be precarious, shaped as much by grief and powerlessness as by strength. Healing is communal, partial, and ongoing, and justice, in the absence of legal redress, becomes a deeply fraught endeavor.

Through this layered portrayal, *The Round House* offers a profound commentary on the endurance of Indigenous familial and cultural bonds in the face of relentless trauma. By bringing these dynamics to light, Erdrich contributes a critical narrative that both mourns historical and contemporary injustices and celebrates the stubborn persistence of life, identity, and community amid them.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a focused analysis of motherhood and trauma in *The Round House*, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of the research is confined to a close reading of a single novel, which, while rich in complexity, may not fully capture the broader diversity of Indigenous experiences of motherhood and trauma across different tribal contexts or literary traditions. Future comparative studies incorporating multiple Native American authors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these themes.

Second, this analysis primarily engages with trauma theory and Indigenous feminist frameworks, which, while highly relevant, represent only a portion of the critical lenses available. Approaches such as decolonial theory, intersectionality, or masculinity studies could further deepen insights into the novel's treatment of gender, power, and resistance.

Finally, the study focuses mainly on textual analysis and does not incorporate empirical perspectives from Indigenous communities themselves. While literary analysis provides crucial theoretical insights, future interdisciplinary research combining literary criticism with ethnographic or oral history methods could offer a



more grounded and community-centered perspective on trauma, healing, and survivance in Indigenous contexts. Recognizing these limitations invites further inquiry and strengthens the ongoing dialogue surrounding trauma, gendered violence, and cultural resilience in Native American literature.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* offers a profound exploration of the enduring impact of gendered violence on Indigenous familial structures, particularly through the disrupted experiences of motherhood and the burdened development of masculinity. Through the portrayal of Geraldine Coutts's emotional withdrawal and Joe Coutts's premature and morally complex maturation, Erdrich illuminates the ways trauma permeates not only individuals but entire family systems, reshaping relationships, identities, and cultural continuities.

Relying on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Indigenous feminist frameworks, this study demonstrates that trauma in *The Round House* is not confined to isolated moments of violence but reverberates through time, affecting multiple generations. Motherhood, often idealized in dominant cultural narratives, is shown as a fragile and fractured space, burdened by both personal grief and historical trauma. Similarly, masculinity is revealed to be a precarious construction, shaped under conditions of systemic neglect and legal disenfranchisement.

Erdrich's novel critiques not only the personal devastation caused by violence but also the broader legal and political structures that perpetuate Indigenous vulnerability. By portraying healing as a collective, partial, and ongoing process rooted in communal practices rather than individual recovery, *The Round House* offers a counter-narrative to Western conceptions of trauma and resilience. It affirms that survivance the active persistence of Indigenous identity and culture endures even amidst profound suffering.

While this study has offered a focused examination of *The Round House*, future research could expand by incorporating comparative studies across multiple Indigenous authors or integrating interdisciplinary approaches that blend literary analysis with community-based research. Such expansions would further enrich our understanding of how narratives of trauma, motherhood, and survivance operate across diverse Native American contexts.

Ultimately, this study highlights that Erdrich's portrayal of motherhood and trauma demands a rethinking of resilience, justice, and familial bonds within both literary and cultural discourses. *The Round House*

stands as a vital testament to the enduring strength and complexity of Indigenous communities navigating historical and contemporary violence.

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