

## INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ROUND HOUSE*

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### Abstract

*This paper attempts to analyse the “ Inequality and Justice” in Louise Erdrich’s ‘The Round House’ in which the writer presents a situation where Native Americans face inequality and injustice at the hands of Euro Americans and towards the end of the novel seek justice in their own traditional way. Native Americans, referred to as American Indians, are basically the aboriginals or indigenous people of America. They are commonly termed as ‘original inhabitants’ because their residence in America predates modern history. The other nomenclature for these Native Americans is ‘red Indians’. Native Americans are not colonized people in strict sense but their situation is no better than the colonized ones. In this context Ania Loomba can be quoted as having said that: “Colonialism is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people... but a version of it can be duplicated from within.”*

**Keywords:-** Euro Americans, red Indians, Colonialism.....

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## INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ROUND HOUSE*

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This paper attempts to analyse the “ Inequality and Justice” in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House* in which the writer presents a situation where Native Americans face inequality and injustice at the hands of Euro Americans and towards the end of the novel seek justice in their own traditional way. Native Americans, referred to as American Indians, are basically the aboriginals or indigenous people of America. They are commonly termed as ‘original inhabitants’ because their residence in America predates modern history. The other nomenclature for these Native Americans is ‘red Indians’. Native Americans are not colonized people in strict sense but their situation is no better than the colonized ones. In this context Ania Loomba can be quoted as having said that: “Colonialism is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people... but a version of it can be duplicated from within.”

Native Americans are living on their own land as migrants. When Europeans came to America, in order to establish their business and to settle down there, they needed land so they forced the native people to sell their lands. Europeans used many tricks and weapons to reduce the population of the Native Americans and to get their lands; such as distribution of infected blankets and forceful signing of land treaties. As J. Jorge Klor de Alva explains, one’s experience of colonial exploitation depends on one’s position within this hierarchy:

In most places, the original inhabitants, who logically grouped themselves into separate cultural units( i.e. ethnicities), all but disappeared after contact, wiped out physically by disease and abuse, and later, genetically and socially by miscegenation, and lastly, culturally, by the religious and political practices of the Europeans and their mixed progeny. Even in the regions where native people survived as corporate groups in their own greatly transformed communities, ...they were greatly reduced in number and politically and socially marginalized from the new centres of power.

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Since that time, Native Americans have been living on reservations with very few facilities and only 566 legally recognised tribes of Native Americans are left. The internal fractures and divisions between the natives and the white settlers forced the weaker section to witness struggle, rivalry, exploitation which gave rise to inequalities towards them and ended up with their resistance in their own ways.

Louise Erdrich is a Native American writer who belongs to Chippewa tribe. She is one of the explorer of Native American Literature whose works enable us to peep into the lives and manners of Native Americans and concerns of these neglected and downtrodden people. Erdrich's concern of projecting the plight of these aboriginals is very much evident through her discussions of the various conflicting codes in her novels. Some of the alarming issues in Erdrich's novels are Christianity versus Shamanic belief; Present mechanical versus Ceremonial times; the nuclear family versus tribal kinship system; and twinge to be both Euro American and Native American, a confused state to be both catholic and tribal beliefs.

In the novel *The Round House* Erdrich makes Joe, a thirteen-year old boy her mouthpiece to express her concern for the pitiful conditions of Native Americans. Joe's mother Geraldine is attacked and raped by white man who shatters her completely. Joe's innocence gets depraved by the move of his mother's assailment which is directly in contrast with Native American decency corrupted by Euro Americans. In 2009, Amnesty International reported in "Maze of Injustice" that one in three Native American women would be raped in their lifetimes; Non-native men perpetrate 86 percent of these sexual assaults upon Native women.

Native Americans are facing atrocities and injustice from the U.S government and mainstream American people. Native Americas are subjected to more violent crimes include murder, assault, drug trafficking, gang violence and illegal immigration through tribal land. Euro Americans have always tried to dominate, exploit, and assimilate native people and culture. They want that natives should adopt their white cultural and religious beliefs which they consider 'superior'. They make attempts to assimilate natives into mainstream society and are made to civilize them through education such as forceful enrolments of native children to various boarding schools.

In context of the novel we find inconveniences confronted by Native Americans on account of unjust laws and policies produced by U.S government. The text reads that, “In 1953, when congress not only decided to try termination out on us but passed public law 280, which gave certain states criminal and civil jurisdiction over Indian lands within their borders.”

Joe’s mother Geraldine is attacked and raped by white man. The important question in Geraldine’s attack is not just who committed it, but it is equally important that where the crime happened- on the state or tribal land. The identity of the attacker- whether he is Indian or non-Indian and location of the crime would decide as which way they seek the justice. Since the rapist find an easy way out of criminal justice system of whites, Joe finally restores to seek justice as per the tribal justice system. He shoots and kills the rapists.

Native American children meet with brutal treatment at the hands of whites in boarding schools. Kevin Finney, a local historian and life ways institute director writes that: “ from the 1870’s until the 1930’s we removed almost every native American child from their home almost and institutionalized them in boarding schools, ...Their heads were shaved, they were deloused, they were beaten for speaking their own language. This was an Americanization program.”

These are government programs that are to break and destroy native culture. Most of the Native Americans refuse to go to church after the brutal treatment they are meted out with in boarding schools. Joe’s mother Geraldine is one of them. Joe himself confesses p: “we all knew that my mother had stopped going to church after she returned from boarding school”

Native Americans do not get good health facilities as compared to Euro Americans who outcast them from their own land first and then ostracized them. Native Americans are victims of ‘internal racisms’ after being landless. To cite an incidence from the novel, when Geraldine is hospitalized after brutal attack, a white lady flings a derogatory comment towards Joe, “don’t you Indians have your own hospital over their? Aren’t you building a new one?”(*The Round House* 11)

Native Americans on reservations are not allowed to avail the resources and they face racism at the hands of white Americans. Ali Rattansi in his book *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* writes:

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Imperialism expansion provided essential intellectual and economic resources in a new social landscape in which class was racialized, and race became intertwined with class and gender in the government of colonial populations. And ideas of race began to exhibit a complexity that cannot be captured in a simple equation between white superiority and non-white inferiority (45).

On reservations, the plight of the natives is more miserable. There they are with limited resources. Inequality and racism issues can be seen in the novel, at one point, when Joe with his friends go to a catholic beach to have fun but are stopped by the members of the Youth Encounter Christ who acclaim that it is a beach only for Catholics and not for Indians. Since Joe and his friends are Indians they have to either leave the beach or join their organisation. The harmonious and serene culture, religion and beliefs of the natives are in flux because of the whites. As Europeans regard themselves the most civilized and refined peoples on the earth, they come up with 'the idea of progress' of savages (native people of America). According to one of the statement of anonymous Native American critic- as she says: "Of course we are crazy, first the whites conquered us, took our best land, sent us away to become white, then sent us back to be Indian again, then told us how much Indian we are and then left us on the reservation with nothing"

When Euro Americans banned the Native American religion and cultural practices they built round houses for their religious ceremonies which showed that they were living restricted lives on reservations. In the novel Joe is surprised by the unjust laws and practices for Native Americans by the white authorities. Laws are meant for the betterment of any society and for punishing the criminals who break them. But history of the Native Americans shows the upside down picture of this. Native Americans have to act just as puppets in the hands of the United States. Erdrich handles the problematic scenario of jurisdiction in *The Round House* and account of inconveniences faced by the Native Americans in their efforts to receive justice through the United States legal system.

Throughout the novel, Erdrich contrasts one belief to the other. For instance, on the one hand there is the Roman Catholic belief that every ultimately results in good. That alters from United States legal system, which has exploited the Indians through a stream of fractured promises. On the other hand, in a tribe which is not bound by laws make its own way of justice

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through best possible actions. So, in a way it is in contrast of catholic versus tribal justice. In the novel, in one of the conversation between Joe and Father Travis, Father Travis tells Joe:

The only thing god can do, and does and of the time, is to draw good from any evil situation ... Every time there is an evil, much good comes out from it- people in these circumstances choose to do an extra amount of good, because stronger in their devotion to Jesus, or their favourite saint or attain an unusual communion of some sort in their families. (*The Round House* 297)

From the above speech of father Travis we can figure out that here he cannot only justify catholic beliefs but also tribal beliefs. Joe's guilt to kill her mother's attacker can be wiped out after inferring from Father Travis's guidance where he is suggesting Joe that he cannot only "choose good over evil, but the opposite too" (*The Round House* 297). Here he acts as a guiding light to Joe, who justifies ways of God to him. Joe on the other hand, a Native American boy, chooses his own ancestral way of justice by killing the accused or windigo when he finds himself disillusioned by the judgement. When Joe finds out that it is Linden who raped his mother and killed Malya another native American girl he is confused about the further proceedings. Finally, Joe decides to seek justice according to his ancestral ways and kill him with the help of his friend Cappy. Joe and his family find peace after his death. The Ojibwe believes that when an evil spirit or windigo emerges it must be hunted down and killed for the attainment of peace in the society.

In this novel Louise Erdrich, explains in detail the relationship between Euro Americans and Native Americans. Linden and Linda are twins (brother and sister) both by a white mother but in their deeds they are altogether different and so is their behaviour towards Indians. Linda has good relations with Joe's family as well as other families on reservations as she was informally adopted by one of the Indian family. If Linden shows a picture of those white people who exploit and hate Indians, Linda represents those whites who have good relations with the Native Americans. Here, hope exists for the betterment of the Native Americans.

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