

"Echoes of Violence: Trauma and Testimony in Louise Erdrich's *the Round House*"

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The Round house by Louise Erdrich is a poignant and multifaceted coming of age novel which delves deeper into the lives of Ojibwe indigenous communities. This narrative is set in the backdrop of a serious crime which was committed in a sacred place in a Native American reservation called North Dakota. The novel unravels the complexities of trauma, seeking justice and the failure of the jurisdictionary system in protecting indigenous women. Through this narrative Erdrich attempted to represent a profound critique of systemic injustice and discrimination on indigenous communities by blending together personal and collective experiences of trauma and survival. The novel revolves around the brutal rape of a Native American woman named Geraldine Cuotts and it's traumatic consequences on her family. Erdrich explores the complexities of grappling with the legal system in the US through the representation of thirteen year old boy Joe Cuotts, who took initiative in investigating for the culprits and fought with legal authorities for seeking justice for his mother Geraldine. As the plot unfolds, serious issues such as discrimination, patriarchal violence and years of oppression and intergenerational trauma endured by indigenous communities since colonialism are depicted through certain incidents and characters.

Trauma Theory as a critical lens : The contributions of Cathy Caruth

Cathy Caruth is one of the foundational and significant figures in the field of trauma studies. Trauma theory emerges from psychological, psychoanalytical and post-structuralist traditions and it provides certain tools for the researchers to comprehend how severe experiences of trauma, endurance and suppression of emotions alter identities and narrative structures. Caruth's renowned work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) has influenced modern conceptions of trauma as an event that defies simple representation and persists through obsessive repetition.

The foundation of trauma theory is the understanding that some experiences, whether individual or group, can overwhelm the psyche to the point that they are difficult to fully understand or integrate into consciousness. These incidents which are sudden and violent creates a huge impact on the mind and it will be unable for the mind to process it. This concept was put forward by one of the pioneers of trauma studies named Sigmund Freud in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) which established the idea of the "repetition compulsion," which postulates that people who suffer from trauma frequently relive the event indirectly through compulsive behaviors, dreams, and flashbacks. According to Freud, trauma is actually found in the recurrent revisiting of the occurrence rather than in the actual time of the incident; this process represents the psyche's attempt to make sense of what at first eluded awareness.

On the other hand Cathy Caruth expands and complicates Freud's ideas by arguing that trauma is defined by a paradox- that it is both an overwhelming experience and one that is not completely known or understood. Caruth's distinctive integration of literary analysis, deconstruction, and psychoanalytic theory helps to frame trauma as an ethical and epistemological problem rather than just a psychological injury. Cathy Caruth's theories enables to critically examine the cultural representation of trauma in literary works. The aftermath of trauma and violence in the novel *The Round House* can be analysed using Caruth's contributions. There is a long history of abuse against Native women, which is frequently disregarded by state and federal agencies. Geraldine is not isolated in her pain and carries the burden of trauma for years. Joe's pain and suffering can be categorised as a collective trauma, as he is influenced by his elders stories of oppression, legal failures of the tribal court and the fractured sovereignty of the indigenous communities. Thus the narrative reflects the entanglement of individual suffering with collective memory and structural oppression.

Cathy Caruth's contributions

Cathy Caruth is an influential figure in the field of trauma studies and her works played a crucial role in shaping trauma theory into a literary and ethical inquiry mainly through her emphasis on the unspeakability of trauma and its demand for ethical witnessing. Cathy Caruth's foundational text, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) synthesizes psychoanalytic and poststructuralist insights to present trauma not simply as a psychological wound but as a profound epistemological rupture. *"To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."* Cathy Caruth proposed that trauma takes hold of an individual. It's not a memory that one can control or access deliberately. The person is instead "possessed" by it, which resurfaces as inexplicable emotional reactions, nightmares, or flashbacks. This supports the notion that trauma is ingrained in the unconscious mind. Caruth questions the notion that trauma is limited to the actual violent incident. Instead Caruth's argues that trauma lies not only in the initial event but also it has aftermaths- as it was not completely comprehended or processed at the time it happened. The term "Unassimilated" refers to an occurrence that was not digested or included into the individual's typical memory or comprehension. This causes it to reappear later in disjointed, unsettling ways—what Freud referred to as the repetition compulsion. The trauma comes back not as a whole memory but as nagging symptoms: anxiety, perplexity, compulsive behaviour and stillness.

According to Caruth trauma is defined by its characteristic feature of belatedness - it is the belief that the complete effects and consequences of trauma is not experienced at the moment of its occurrence instead returns later in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or compulsive repetition. As she writes, trauma is *"the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena."* The idea of cohesive memory and linear time are undermined by this conceptualisation of trauma as an event that is both experienced and not experienced. The ethical aspect of trauma is one of Caruth's most persuasive interventions. She proposes the idea that trauma is not only a matter of individual suffering but also a call to others, which can be considered as a request for listening, recognition and responsibility. Caruth describes this as *"the wound that cries out"* which refers to the idea that the traumatized subject speaks not merely of their personal sorrow, but of a truth beyond them: a historical or collective reality that can only be accessible by listening. The act of witnessing becomes central to trauma theory. This ethical imperative to bear witness, to listen without demanding coherence or closure, challenges readers and critics alike to remain open to narratives that are fragmented, painful, and unresolved. Caruth's focus on observing and her examination of the cyclical temporality of trauma are still quite helpful while reading novel *The Round House*. The impossibility of completely expressing trauma is reflected in Joe's obsessive, fragmentary narrative and Geraldine's silence following her assault. Joe's attempts to comprehend his mother's fate and process his own inner turmoil can be interpreted as an attempt to witness an event that is difficult to put into words. The novel, like the trauma it depicts, moves in loops and gaps rather than linear progression—echoing Caruth's insight that trauma *"is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available."*

Trauma in Native American

In indigenous communities, trauma is not just a psychological phenomenon instead it can be considered as a collective, deeply entrenched and intergenerational reality. Lives of Native Americans are still shaped by the legacy of unresolved historical trauma left by settler colonialism's impacts, which include forced relocation, cultural genocide, the breakdown of tribal governance, and institutional marginalisation. The novel *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich demonstrates how a shared history of violence, trauma and cultural erasure is inextricably linked to individual suffering or personal trauma. There are a certain number of traumatic events that took place in the history of indigenous communities such as massacres, the loss of land, forced assimilation through boarding schools, and the disruption of traditional family and cultural structures. All these trauma and its burden is passed down through generations not just through storytelling but also through certain behaviours, silence and societal situations.

Plot and Characters as Vessels of Trauma

The Round House by Louise Erdrich centres around a violent act of sexual assault which catalyzes the novel's exploration of trauma. Geraldine Cuotts, who was a native woman residing in the North Dakota reservation was brutally raped and almost killed by a group of men. Geraldine was brutally raped by a whiteman named Linden Lark and it was committed on an ambiguous jurisdictional land and this incident sets the narrative in motion and shapes the psychological and emotional landscape of the novel. Louise Erdrich portrays this act as a rupture that echoes throughout the lives of the protagonists, especially that of Geraldine's thirteen year old boy Joe Cuotts, rather than as a single tragic occurrence. Erdrich attempts to showcase trauma as a profoundly personal and politically positioned force that permeates memory, identity and language through the interweaving of story and character.

The novel is narrated by the teenage boy Joe Cuott and he tried to recall the events from adulthood. Joe occupies a dual position in the narrative, both as a witness to trauma and a subject shaped by the pain and burdens of trauma. Joe's narrative is regarded as disjointed and emotionally unstable and frequently alternates between anger, humour, and numbness. This is a stylistic representation of what Cathy Caruth describes as trauma's interference with coherent selfhood and linear narrative. This fragmentation mirrors Caruth's assertion that trauma is defined by "*the way it was precisely not known in the first instance*". Joe did not witness the incident, therefore it is not the event that haunts his mind, but rather the silence and emptiness it leaves behind. Considering his mother's silence, he remarks: "*My mother had gone inside herself and shut the door.*" Geraldine's silence following the sexual assault is an obvious sign of trauma and pain. Geraldine withdraws herself from her beloved ones and refuses to answer any of their questions and she even denies to name her attacker. This particular act of refusal from Geraldine's side aligns with Cathy Caruth's ideology that trauma "*is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it was... not known.*" This concept refers to the idea that a traumatic event cannot be fully experienced at the moment it occurs instead it overwhelms the person's ability to comprehend it consciously. Geraldine's silence and withdrawal after the brutal attack cannot be considered as the signs of weakness but they are manifestations of the trauma's unassimilated nature. "*I don't know if I can say.*" Geraldine uttered these lines to Joe and it reveals not only her pain but also highlights how trauma defies description—it is "not known" in a way that keeps her from telling it in its entirety. The incident has not been linearly and narratively processed by her mind. Her failure to identify whether the incident occurred on federal, state, or reservation grounds serves as a metaphor for how trauma blurs boundaries, both psychologically and legally.

Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as a "crisis of truth" and a challenge to narrative coherence is best illustrated by her refusal to recount her experience. Neither a timeframe nor a cause-and-effect framework can adequately describe Geraldine's trauma. Her body recalls what her voice is unable to express, creating a conflict that Joe and the reader must learn to deal with. Her internal confusion is reflected in the uncertainty about the location of the violence. As a result, Geraldine's trauma is "located" in the psychological pain and temporal disruption it creates rather than only in the physical act. The fact that it was never completely "known" in the first place means that it bothers her far more than what actually happened. Her delayed and fragmented speech highlights how belatedly devastating knowledge is revealed. Her inability to articulate her trauma makes her silence a representation of the limitations of language in describing traumatic experiences.

Joe Cuotts psychological disintegration is displayed through his change in behaviours and voice. As the narrator of the novel Joe's narration throws light on the repetitive structure of trauma which is evident through many instances such as memories, return to same questions and depictions of certain fantasies of revenge. Caruth writes, "*What returns in the flashback is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.*" This statement encapsulates the essence of how trauma functions in the mind: it recalls the unresolved, unprocessed character of the incident rather than merely recollections of it. In other words, it is considered that the trauma was never really understood in the first place, it is re-lived as a troubling repeat that keeps asserting itself rather than as a whole, intelligible recollection. In the novel, Joe is not portrayed as the direct victim of his mother Geraldine's brutal rape. As the story unfolds Joe turns out to be a severe victim of trauma because he was deeply traumatized by his mother's rape and her change in behaviours. Joe was not even able to accept his mother's silence. Trauma is partly in not knowing. The inability of the mind to completely register the event as it occurs is what causes trauma, not only the actual violence. The

event goes "unclaimed" or "unknown" because the person is too overwhelmed to absorb it in real time. This "not knowing" indicates that the experience was never completely understood or incorporated into the person's conscious awareness, not that they forget it. As a result, it continues coming back in disruptive ways, such as nightmares, obsessive behaviours, emotional triggers, or flashbacks. The mind's attempt to process what was never fully processed is what these returns are.

As the story progresses, Joe's initial reactions to his mother's attack are confusion and fear which later develops into obsession. He uses his obsession with finding the criminal and obtaining justice as a coping mechanism for the severe loss of security, order, and authority. Joe's trauma shows itself not only in his violent tendencies but also in his psychological disintegration as he grows more and more cut off from his innocence as a child and drawn into the violent adult world of moral uncertainty. Joe's thoughts often veer toward violence—not because he is naturally violent, but rather because the trauma necessitates a release that words cannot offer. Instead of being progressive, his memory becomes cyclical, reliving unsolved grief and unanswered questions. Instead of being progressive, his memory becomes cyclical, reliving unsolved grief and unanswered questions. Joe's ultimate decision to kill Linden Lark is the result of this repetition. This act does not provide closure, despite the fact that it seems to restore agency. *"I had committed a crime that would follow me. That would, if I allowed it, define me. My soul hung back in some stunned place"*. Joe has taken justice into his own hands by killing Linden Lark, and this statement indicates that the trauma does not end with the action rather, it starts a new stage. In addition to the legal and societal repercussions, he is aware that the crime will follow him mentally in the form of remorse, uncertainty, and identity crisis. Joe fears being defined by his trauma and his response to it. He is now caught between the righteous rage of avenging his mother and the moral cost of that act.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is unsettled, open, and resistant to closure; it cannot be cleanly resolved or narrativized. Retaliation alone won't be enough to heal Joe's trauma. Joe's soul, or his inner self, was unable to completely understand or carry out the act. He is still astonished, frozen, and cut off from the experience. This indicates a psychological breakdown rather than merely remorse. According to Caruth's theory, Joe depicts dissociation which is one among the core symptom of trauma. Traumatic events can cause a divide in time and awareness, according to Caruth. Because the self was not really "there" during the event, the trauma persists, resurfaces, and necessitates revisiting. In a state of shock, Joe's spirit lags behind, illustrating the temporal dislocation trauma creates.

Joe's father, Bazil Cuotts is portrayed as a quiet but a powerful vessel of trauma- both personal and collective. As a tribal judge and as a member of the indigenous community, Bazil had constantly navigated with the fractured legal system and witnessed certain injustices that happened against his people, particularly indigenous women. His character serves as an example of how trauma can be felt not only through overt acts of violence, such as Geraldine's rape or Joe's mental collapse, but also through closeness, helplessness, and the weight of seeing injustice. Bazil's trauma is not obvious as Geraldine or Joe but it is deeply embedded in his words, silenced and moral fatigue. As a result of recurring institutional betrayal, Bazil's trauma is legal, moral and existential. His position, which should symbolize justice and protection, becomes a site of deep helplessness and internal conflict.

Bazil's identity is deeply tied with justice. However, Bazil suffers a severe split between his principles and the harsh realities of colonial judicial systems after his wife is brutally raped by a group of men and the law fails to hold the offender accountable. This impotence plays a crucial role in shaping his trauma. Bazil is confronted not only with the emotional pain, sufferings of his family but also faces disappointment from the legal system and this triggers his trauma. *"Our laws are not the same. We can't prosecute him. Not on our land."* By this statement Bazil is referring to an actual and disastrous legal loophole: Tribal courts lost the authority to bring charges against non-Native people as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1978 *Oliphant v. Suquamish* ruling. This implies that the tribe lacks the legal authority to take action, despite the fact that Geraldine's assailant is known and the crime occurred on or close to tribal property. The essence of Bazil's suffering is captured in this statement: due to existing jurisdictional gaps and legal loopholes native nations are unable to prosecute non-Native offenders, even for crimes committed on tribal grounds or sacred places. His personal crisis demands action, but the legal system rejects Native sovereignty, trapping him in the middle. The anguish caused by this helplessness is based on institutional betrayal and structural violence. This statement was uttered by Bazil Cuotts to Joe after the brutal rape of Geraldine and this line reflects not just the legal fact but also throws light on the deeply personal and communal wound. After Geraldine's assault, Bazil attempts to investigate the crime and seek justice for his wife.

However, it becomes quickly apparent that the location of the assault is legally ambiguous—it occurred on a piece of land that falls into the grey area between federal, state, and tribal jurisdictions. This legal ambiguity is a result of historical colonial policies that fractured tribal sovereignty and left Indigenous nations without full legal authority over crimes committed by non-Natives on Native land.

This denial of justice and failure of legal system is traumatic not only for Bazil as a judge but also for Joe as Geraldine's son and as a thirteen year old boy who is trying to understand the limits of justice. This incident introduces Joe to the harsh reality of structural injustice, where laws meant to protect fail because they were never designed with Native lives in mind. *"Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor later on."* These lines from Cathy Caruth's unclaimed experiences reveals the idea that trauma is not a wound that can be immediately understood or processed when it occurs instead it overwhelms the mind's capacity to make sense of the event in real time. Because the trauma cannot be fully known or assimilated in the moment, it becomes a delayed experience and resurfaces later in fragments, flashbacks, nightmares, or behaviors.

For Bazil, the "unassimilated nature" of the trauma lies in the paradox of his role as a tribal judge who is helpless and unable to deliver justice. The inability to protect his wife or even seek formal redress haunts him—not just as a husband, but as a legal authority who must continue operating within a system that systematically devalues Native lives. Bazil's frustration is evident in the way he reads legal cases with Joe, searching desperately for legal precedents or possibilities that are unlikely to hold any power in their situation. Bazil's reserved manner and decision to suppress his emotions rather than publicly discuss his personal suffering are signs of his emotional weariness. His silence about the failure of jurisdictional system and limitations of law is not a result of ignorance, but rather of the fact that realising them brings neither solace nor closure. Bazil's trauma is not only personal but also collective and historical. *"We are trying to live here, son. That's all. Just live."* Bazil's utters this dialogue to his son Joe on the wake of Geraldine's assault and this lines reflects the weight of accumulated and unassimilated trauma Bazil has seen and internalized the long history of violence, betrayal, and powerlessness. His trauma settles into silent endurance rather than exploding outward. His counsel to "just live" is a method of coping with trauma rather than a rejection of it. These lines uttered by Bazil to his son also marks the shift from idealism to realism. This statement serves both a lesson and a warning to Joe. The reality of being Native in a colonised judicial system is something Bazil wants his son to comprehend; he wants him to discover methods to persevere rather than be shattered by it. It's a potent moment that acknowledges both generational resiliency and generational trauma.

Collective and Cultural Trauma

Collective trauma refers to the emotional and psychological impact experienced by a group of people who have undergone a shared traumatic events. Collective trauma affects not just the individuals but it affects an entire communities, cultures, societies which in turn leads to a profound disruption in their functioning and collective identity. On the other hand individual trauma centres on personal experiences, emotions and burdens. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is characterized by its incomprehensibility and the way it defies full integration into consciousness. In her work *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment but returns in the form of haunting repetitions and delayed responses. Caruth's theory mainly addresses individual trauma but this principles can be extended to understand the concept of Collective trauma. The concept of return of the repressed and delayed response can be observed in the communities which have experienced and endured historical traumas such as slavery, colonization and genocide. Cultural narratives, rituals, and collective actions portrays how these groups frequently display symptoms of trauma that reappear throughout generations. Individuals continue to relive the pain on a collective level as a result of their inability to completely comprehend and integrate these horrific occurrences.

The Round House portrays Geraldine's sexual assault and its effects on her thirteen year old son Joe are depicted as immediate and personal trauma, the book purposefully broadens its focus to reveal a collective and cultural trauma that is intricately woven into the experiences of Indigenous communities, especially Native women. Geraldine's brutal rape is not just an isolated crime against an individual instead it is symbol of a broader pattern of systemic violence, institutional neglect, and intergenerational suffering rooted in colonial history. Cathy Caruth's notion of belatedness and unassimilated

experience finds resonance in *The Round House* through the communal responses to Geraldine's rape. In addition to being a personal violation, her assault is representative of a systemic pattern of violence against Indigenous women that is enabled by legal inaction and jurisdictional gaps. This legal impotence perpetuates a collective historical trauma, where justice has continually been denied, deferred or distorted. Bazil's exhausted search of old case files and his suppressed feelings refers to a more profound, cumulative pain that is not openly expressed but is nevertheless embedded in the community's collective memory. Despite internalising the futility of justice, Bazil symbolises a generation of Native elders and leaders who still carry out the legal inquiry rites, possibly out of cultural obligation or optimism for change in the future. Caruth's notion that trauma often returns in repetition through rituals, silence, fragmented thoughts is embodied in Bazil's meticulous but ultimately futile search for a legal solution.

Cultural trauma is defined as a significant disturbance in a group's collective identity caused by a traumatic incident or sequence of incidents that are remembered and passed down through the generations. Cultural trauma affects an individual shared sense of self, memory, and continuity and alters how they understand their past, live in the present, and imagine their future. As a result cultural trauma becomes a part of a community's historical narrative and it get passed down through stories, rituals and as inherited wounds. According to Caruth trauma is "*experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known*," which mirrors how communities often struggle to articulate or confront the full extent of cultural trauma due to denial, suppression, or ongoing systemic oppression. Caruth makes references to intergenerational or cultural trauma in her work, although she does not specifically theorise it. She writes that trauma "*resides... in its repeated possession*," suggesting that trauma is re-lived rather than remembered, which reflects how cultural trauma is re-experienced by descendants who may not have directly lived through the original event.

The Round House by Louise Erdrich depicts cultural trauma as a severe, recurring wound which is deeply rooted not only in individual experiences of violence but indigenous communities has a long history of colonization, legal marginalization and systemic erasure. The novel illustrates how collective and cultural memory of suffering and personal pain are inextricably linked through the interwoven lives of characters including Bazil, Joe, Geraldine, and others. Cathy Caruth's insights into trauma as belated, fragmented, and resistant to full comprehension provide a compelling framework for understanding how trauma functions culturally in the novel.

Joe Cuotts can be considered as a victim of both direct and indirect trauma. His desperate need for justice reflects a broader case of generational trauma, which is considered as an inherited sense of powerlessness and outrage. According to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Joe Cuotts showcases obsessive return of trauma, which is believed as a characteristic feature of survivors. Joe is a victim of cultural trauma, he is a young Native American boy growing up in a world where his communities rights, traditions, values and land are constantly devalued. Joe's final decision to kill his mother's rapist represents a rupture. This violent act does not represent resolution rather, it demonstrates the cycle of trauma causing trauma, which persists in the absence of institutional and cultural healing. Most of the characters in the novel including Geraldine, Joe and Bazil struggles with silence as a response to trauma. Caruth emphasises that trauma frequently defies complete articulation and escapes words. This inarticulacy becomes a cultural trait and it is passed down through the generations. Story telling can be considered as an act of cultural resistance and survival.

The round house which is traditionally conserved as a sacred site for conducting tribal ceremonies becomes the site of Geraldine's rape. This desecration is symbolic representation of colonial intrusion into spiritual and cultural spaces. The round house, which was once a place of gathering turns out to be a haunting symbol of violence, memory, and the loss of sanctity. The trauma inflicted here is not only physical but it is also cultural and spiritual, symbolising the loss of Indigenous sovereignty and religious rituals. This incident reflects the agony of historical trauma such as burning of sacred sites, forced assimilation and prohibition of Native traditions and faiths.