

**Impacts of Alcoholism on society in the fiction of Sherman Alexie**

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**Abstract**

Alcohol abuse is an issue notorious in the Spokane Reservation. It is directly responsible for the death of the characters in Alexie's novels as well as the demise of most of the Indians there. The destructive and devastative effects of alcohol and its inherent setback and hurdle in the way of progress at the Reservation and dysfunction of the family are very competently and elaborately described by the novelist. Alexie's characters voice their disapproval for its widespread use and consider it to be directly liable for much of the upheaval, chaos and disarray in their own families. The portrayal of alcoholism in the novels is representative of the problems of Native American have with the use of alcohol. Much of Sherman's desire to explore and address the issue of alcoholism derives from his own experiences with alcohol in the Reservation.

**Keywords- Alcohol abuse, Dysfunction of family, Chaos and disarray, inherent setback, Isolation and Alienation, Reservation, Poverty**

Alcoholism is a very serious problem in the Native Americans community, and Alexie depicts a Reservation where many of the inhabitants' lives have been destroyed by drinking. Alcohol leads the characters to behave cruelly and make tragic mistakes that could otherwise have been avoided. Alexie also uses alcoholism as a vehicle for characterization. Characters' decision to drink or abstain is often a reflection of their personality, as is their response to other characters that drink.

The aboriginal writer is also concerned with the cultural negotiations that presents day youth have to undertake. Faced with discriminatory laws, social code, and even medical norms, aboriginal youth are often criminalize for not confronting to main stream cultural codes. Louis Nowra's or Jack Davis' plays, for Instance, depict the lack of fit between the two ways of life. The children are forced to join mainstream, white schools where their own culture is erased through a very different program of education. In fact, aboriginal experience has been one forced acculturation, a due process of erasures of their native one and assimilation of the white one. The most famous of aboriginal text, the Canadian Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash* (1985) also dealt with the experience of a young Indian boy. An old medicine man tells Slash:

"It is not the (Native) culture that is lost. It is you. The culture that belongs to us is handed down to us in the sacred medicine ways. Our strength lies there... that is not lost. It is around us here in the mountains and in the wild places. It is in the sound of drums and in the sound of the singing of the bird... We are the ones who are lost, in alcohol and drug and in the cities in the rat races."<sup>1</sup>

Alienation in property law is the capacity for a piece of property or a property right to be sold or otherwise transferred from one party to another. Although property is generally deemed to be alienable, it may be subject to restraints on alienation. Different interpreters have given various definitions of alienation. According to Arnold Kaufman, "To claim that a person is alienated means that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction."<sup>2</sup> Feur Lewes says: "the word alienation is used to convey the emotional tone which accompanies any behavior, in which the person is compelled to act self destructively."<sup>3</sup> According to Kenneth Keniston, "Most usage of 'alienation' share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed that is natural, desirable, or good, has been lost."<sup>4</sup> In the definitions of these thinkers, there is an indication or existed tension or disintegration in the old relations of any other thing or man.

Marx developed his theory of alienation to reveal the human activity that led behind the seemingly impersonal forces dominating society. He showed the aspects of the society in which

people live appear natural and independent, they are the results of past human actions. For Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukas Marx's theory "dissolves the rigid, unhistorical, natural appearance of social institutions; it reveals their historical origins and shows therefore that they are subject to history in every respect including historical decline."<sup>5</sup> Marx showed that not only human action in the past created the modern world, but also that human action could shape a future world free from the contradictions of capitalism.

Victor, one of the main characters of the collection of short stories, *The Lone-Ranger*, was influenced by alcohol from the very beginning of his existence 'I was conceived during one of those drunken nights.' Explains the first person narrator, "half of me formed by my father's whiskey sperm, the other half formed by my mother's vodka egg"<sup>6</sup>. Victor's embryo is said to be the union of two liquors. The statement is directly followed by a sad and humorous comment on the strong bond between Victor and his father that is likened to his father's alcohol addiction. "I was borne a goofy Reservation mixed drink," states the narrator, "and my father needed me just as much as he needed every other kind of drink" (*The Lone Ranger*, 27). Obviously, alcohol affects human relationships.

In *Reservation Blues*, "Victor's the best guitar player. I ever heard, when he's sober"<sup>7</sup>. The influence of alcohol on the pursuits of Native Americans can be clearly observed when the daily events of Victor and his friends are examined. Victor is represented as a kind of Native American whose days pass slowly due to the general lack of work on the Reservation In *The Lone-Ranger*; he rarely consumes alcohol and meditates on the Spokane's alcohol problems. In *Reservation Blues* victor fills his time with drinking and enjoys Junior's company. As a close friend of victor, Junior lets victor spend his time with him in the 'water truck' which Junior drives professionally Victor is also addicted to alcohol that he cannot stop thinking about alcoholic drink. Victor seems to be achiever drinks than Junior, the two drink together many times. Alcohol abuse leads to victor and Junior spoiling their musical performance when they are, together with Thomas, on stage. Playing on the Flathead Reservation, "Junior and victor

started the evening sober but drank all the free booze offered” (Reservation Blues, 55). I think Julius is going to go bad, he said no way,” I said. He is just herring around.<sup>8</sup>

As we can see Victor is being quite optimistic whereas Adrian realizes is going to become a drunk and his talents will be spoiled “It is hard to be optimists on the Reservation.” claims the narrator (The Lone-Ranger, 49). A year later, Victor and Adrian are sitting at the same place and see Julius passing by. But this time, Julius is complete drunk. Victor says to Adrian that Julius has been drinking a lot and he even consumes sterna, a fuel made from denatured and jellied alcohol. Julius has a match in the evening. Victor, Adrian, and other Reservation fan are very disappointed “He still looked good in his uniform,” states the narrator, although, “he was a little puffy around the edges. But he just was not the ballplayer we all remembered pr expected. He missed shots, traveled, threw dump passes that we all knew were dump passes.” (The Lone-Ranger, 51)

The mainstream society’s treatment of Native Americans has left Junior, Thomas and victor with major personal wounded. Their fantasy is that they have not ever been adversely affected. In “*A Drug called Tradition*” a story in *The Lone-Ranger*, The boys anger at their desperate situation is revealed as well as their inner wishes and feelings. The three boys who have been hurt due to their experience with people coming from the mainstream society imagine themselves to be would be winner of their battle with the white people. They call for a revolution in their visions. The Characters go slowly back before the time that the white came. Meanwhile, Junior sums us the actual history. As he puts it; “They’re all gone, my tribe is gone. Those blankets they gave us, infected with smallpox, have killed us” (The Lone-Ranger, 17) with the arrival of the whites came diseases that devastated whole Native Americans population. George Catlin confirms that “a multitude of plagues reached (Native Americans) during the Sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the entire catalogues of European diseases: Viruses such as smallpox, chicken pox, measles and influenzas”<sup>9</sup>

After analyzing Alexie’s work it brings that a credible account of Native American trying to deal with their desperate struggles with life by drinking only to remain close themselves in a

vicious circle of problems. Alcohol has proved to be the medication for both Alexie and his characters in hard times. Alcohol serves as a means of self defense against the outer world. Characters want to escape from the bad situation through alcohol has shown itself to be a rather short term help and does not heal the suffering of the examined.

Alexie admits that his experience on the spoken Reservation inspired his writing “most of that stuff I write about happened to me or somebody I knew”. Although the Spokanes' complain about his recurrent motifs, the other points out that what he portrays is not so far from reality. The actual influences of the individuals alcoholics on the main non-drink protagonists in relation to forming their world views, further personality development and attitudes alcohol and it deals with the question of whether there is solution to Native American incentives.

Since their Arrival, the acts of Europeans on the North American continent have also offended Native American lifestyle as far as the issue of poverty among the Native is concerned. The White American attitude towards Native American have resulted in few chances for the Native to find a satisfying job which would earn an amount of money to live well, Unemployment, low income and no opportunity for most Native to get a well paid job have been risk factors in development of Alcoholism among the ethnic group. Having little money, there are other frequent factors related to high rates of alcohol use among Native American people living on Reservation.

People who are without jobs, low income and without a stable income, became alcoholic. People who are unemployed can have a lot of free time with nothing to do. In such cases, there is an easy way to fill ample of time with drinking alcoholic beverages. It is not only his opinion; the connection to boredom has been of the popular views about drinking for a long time. In Alexie's novels several examples can be found which prove that the idleness due to unemployment and underemployment may result in heavy drinking.

In this sense, we could conclude and come at this point that main problem of Reservation's people is consume liquor and crucial conditions occurred by this drinking habit.

People are suffering from their various difficulties and mental agony, they want to escape from this anguish and they prefer to take the help and move on this path of boozing.

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