

Racial Conflict in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues

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Abstract

Racial conflict, a post-modern menace and threat to the very being and existence of this planet occupy a major part of Alexie's works. Race, once considered in essential terms, is now seen as socially and ideologically constructed to meet specific need during slavery. Race was used as a mode of social organization and identity formation in the west (especially in USA in the era of slavery) just as caste has been used in India. Today there is process oriented theory of race. It sees race a racial projects, efforts to institutionalize racial meaning and identities in social structure like individual, family, community, and state. Racial space is also more globalizes today, with the international movement of labor and immigration creating new racial identity. Racial bias makes White believe that Indians are barbaric and incapable of anything, and that they cannot control their fate. White expected Indian to be obedient and subservient, and they justify their colonial rule and military oppression by saying that the U. S. military is the best friend to Indians. When Indians are wronged and given a bad name, they are helpless. The White mainstream society is mainly formulated into a male image, whereas the Indians are considered a female image.

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After the Indians were subdued and disabled militarily, the government and Church began to assimilate Indians in the Judeo-Christian culture. They robbed the parents of their children, dumping the children into White adoptive families or boarding schools, forcing them to dress and behave in White ways, forbidding them to speak their native language, and forcing them to relinquish their native religions. As consequently, many young Indians were cut off from their traditional culture. Indians are also abused due to the conception that they are inferior.

Few characters have obscure identity causes by influence of the Church. Such characters are usually prevented from acquainting their own religion and culture because of the interference and inhibition from the Catholic Church on the Reservation. Able is a kind of character in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968. They would have to undergo plenty of transformations and suffering before they can reconcile with their native religion, ritual, and value orientation, so as to religion identity.

The issue of racial discrimination has become societal norm in America. Sherman Alexie's capital punishment shows the injustice that still exists. Poem speaks to the prejudice that is accepted and current in America's past and present. Alexie from minority group has seen the ugly

face daily in this land of the free. Sherman, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, grew up on a Reservation in Washington yet attended a high school. In an interview Alexie occurs that it becomes a drinking problem when it affects your relationships with people, when it affects your job or your school, your grade point average. Alexie explains that "so it is writing about alcohol that helps me stay sober. And I think reading about alcoholism helps other people stay sober."¹

As a result of hatred towards Indians and European colonizers lust after resourceful Indian Territory, the tribes were relocated to remote areas known as 'Reservation' mainly by the beginning of the 20th century. Particularly in the second half of the 19th century, the tribal communities were militarily forced to this Reservation. Alexie depicts characters that are world wearied and heavy with 500 years worth of humiliation and rejection. They have lived their lives in the confines of Reservation, resorting to alcohol, depression and rejection.

Alexie's themes involving, racial relations through cultural oppression, cultural confrontation, passive integrated into the final point to racial integration, and regularity to form a complete circle including racial oppression. The work of Alexie direct deals with the conflict between Indian and Whites. White media racist remarks, encroachment of Whites scholar of Indian cultural heritage, distortions angered White writers of Indian culture are trying to find their own cultural roots, to form their own racial identity. Indian youth, resulting in a head on collision of these Indians and the Whites. Alexie depicted that the violence, war, hatred, anger cannot solve the race problem; people need to forget hatred, forgiveness and caring. Thus, hostilities, mutual integration will stop among White and Indians. The author describes growth of fictional rounded structure, and finally to the hero successful integration into mainstream society outcome. Alexie brakes the stereotype White thinking about Indians across political boundaries, free shuffle in two between ethnic groups. He deconstructs Indian stereotypes, and shaping the image of hard working intelligence, endurance and supportive Indians.

Since recalling history entails reclamation of memory, writer from across Asia, Africa, and South America search for layers of memory that always collective as racial, ethnic and communal. Local histories are intimately linked to the specifically to a tribe or clan, space enters into post colonial attempts to recover collective memory. Most post colonial writing therefore link space with racial memory: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, 1938 is perhaps the best known example of a text that explore such a localized, community bound, geographically specific memory. It is rarely linear and involves circuitous routes through verifiable historical facts, myth, and legends. Contradictory characters of Alexie want to escape from memories of their past for various reason so they want to cross Reservation for the betterment and try to pull out from Reservation. Protagonists have negative memories and experience with them.

Cliff writes, in a brilliant example of memory, "And so father and daughter walked through what was one of a great house,... These building out back... had contained molasses and rum and slaves... the ceiling was low usually brushing the forehead, so the inhabitants has to walk stooped forward. As they stooped to hoe; stooped to stir... From the background, in which she now stood, noting the existence of the foundation stones and the gullies in the earth, but not knowing the former life they represent, Clare could see in the distance long funnels of smoke and an occasional tongue of flames..."²

Alexie's use of popular culture defies the destroying typical type of image enfolding accounts of characters who speak to the persistence into the present of colonial oppression on the Reservation. Analytical views will show that Alexie brings historical such as Crazy Horses, Custer, Colonel Wright and Qualchan into popular culture to make a statement about the persistence of colonial oppression and its presence on the Reservation life. James Cox's assertion that Indian authors such as Alexie is re-writing image of popular culture, foster-colonial domination and conquest. Cox claims that "Alexie's revision of non native storytelling traditions constitutes significant challenges to colonialism and the imagination that informs it."³

Native Americans have been oppressed by White for centuries. And this oppression became the main cause and it's resulted of racial hatred. The oppression can be classified into three stages: military genocide, religious assimilations, and commercial exploitation. It is found that military genocide remains a hunting memory for Native American in Alexie's novels and short stories that White religion has led the Native American youth into bewilderment and has functioned as a cloak for Whites' abusive actions, and that commercial exploitation has become the current method of seizing benefit from Native American.

Alexie addresses this issue in *Reservation Blues* using the simplified model of the band. Betty and Veronica, two White women, are the groupie for Coyote Spring. These women "both had long blonde hair and wore too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces."⁴ These women cause turmoil among other Native American when they join Coyote Springs as backup singers. It is controversial because they are pretending to belong to a culture that is their own. The reactions of other Native American to the band in the novel can be compared to how Native American literature. In an open letter to the Spokane Tribe, the Wellpinit Rawhide Press writes about the ability of Coyote Springs to represent the Spokane people. Alexie writes, "As you know, Coyote Springs, our local rock band, has just returned from Seattle with two White women. They are named Betty and Veronica of all things.

The Reservation, where the effects of what Alexie chooses to call an "Ongoing colonialism still asserts its painful presence, is central in Alexie's fiction, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* 1993 and *The Reservation Blues*, 1995. Presented as a demarcated space of suffering, Alexie's fictional Reservation is a place where his characters are tormented by collective memories of a genocide past, of cavalry approved hanging, massacres, and small pox infected blankets. "It is a haunted place where faint voices... echo all over (*Reservation Blues*, 46) and where "dreams are murdered... the bone buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those governments houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development". (*Reservation Blues*, 7).

In Betty and Veronica's song, it is also indicated that anyone can appropriate the Indian image at any time, "It don't matter who you are, you can be Indian in your bones" (*Reservation Blues*, 295). By denying Coyote Springs the opportunity to sign a contract, the White mainstream society oppresses the Indians in a new way; they have presented the Indian from any commercial success or financial gain. By appreciating and simulating the Indian culture, they reenact, in the twentieth century. As a result of the new form of exploitation and oppression, the Indian Band, Coyote Spring, suffers from heavy casualties. Junior Polatkin kills himself on the top of the water

tower. Victor Joseph indulges himself in drinking and sells his soul to the Gentleman, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leave for Spokane. Andrews expresses his puzzlement about Alexie's motivation "What is the purpose of evoking Coyote's power but then resorting to stereotypically self destructive Indian who absolve America of its quit in their symbolic disappearance."⁵ It is true that Coyote Springs brings hope to the Reservation, and things seem to brighten up, with much dependence on the magic guitar and with the inability to resist the gentleman's temptation for power, the band is predestined to fail, which is also stark reality.

The youths in *Reservation Blues* are exactly like this. They scorn their own religion, are influenced by mainstream media; Alexie wishes to show "How fragmentation affects full bloods."⁶ He describes the separation of tradition from modern Indian life and the problems concerning identity hence induced. Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin are not keen on tradition. They often pick on the representative of Spokane tradition, Thomas Builds-the-Fire. They are always drunk. They spend their prize money on drinking. They do not take Big Mom very seriously, "shit, Victor said, she thinks she is a medicine woman" (*Reservation Blues*, 203). Actually, Victor is not the only, or the first, one to question Big Mom's authority. Many of them Indian men who were drawn to Big Mom doubted her abilities. Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in movies" (*Reservation Blues*, 208). These men, including Victor Joseph, think that they are warriors.

They often dismiss Big Mom's admonition or precept by saying you just a woman. Tradition is represented in *Reservation Blues* has been marginalized, with Big Mom living on the Wellpinit Mountain. The youth are virtually lost. Victor is tempted by fame and economic profit, so he sells his soul to the gentleman, which is Satan, the source of evil, at the prices of his best friend Junior. He could not control him. It is the gentleman who makes the guitar play beautiful music. When Sheridan decides that "Victor Joseph is really quite extra ordinary on the lead guitar is originated and powerful, a genuine talent" (*Reservation Blues*, 190).

Alexie is able to merge the plight of Native American with the existential; a Native sense of rootlessness, persecution, exile and quest for identity make them archetype of the fragmented modern men seeking purpose in life. The native becomes a metaphor for the oppressed struggle to withstand the indignities of the modern world. In Alexie's fiction Native Indian share the racial ethic evolved by natives in their historic suffering in exile. And of course; exile and alienation are the basic conditioning factors of the native sensibility. Alexie has discovered that this distinctly identifiable Native experience isolated and magnified reflects the general human experience.

His protagonists are involved in an interminable search through the cluster of everyday existence for sense of satisfying identity. In a world engaged in learning the limitations of intelligence and just coming to grip with man's inability to control the forces of destiny, the Native, a perpetual victim of history, might be able to speak directly in situation of humiliation, nakedness and weakness to the common experience of a human being. His characters begin as self centered and frustrated individuals with a frightened need for success and status. Self transcendence is a painful process for them because it involves a great deal of suffering usually connected in some way to an elaborate and ritualistic trial of identity. Alexie's characters seek connection with the White mainstream society, but failing to attain connection with, they find that

the world to which they fit face turns into a chaos of unfulfilled desires.

Alexie has emphasized that he bases all of his writing on a belief to take the path of positivity and make a way to adopt the both culture, by their own wishes. He often succeeds in showing his own experiences of Reservation, which helps to reform and reshape the image of the Native American and change the way, how they see themselves in a positive way. He writes of the conflicting demands of the inner and outer world of his protagonists. His fiction delineates the dreams and private grief of the spirit, the need of the heart, the pain of loss and the economy of human life.

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