



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974-097X • Vol 16. No. 1 • January - June 2020



Perpetuating Indigenous Sovereignty by Resisting Hybridity in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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Abstract

The diverse Native American tribes have seen the worst bloodsheds since the day one of their encounters with the colonizers. The sharp cultural distinctions between the white and the others continue even today, which ultimately result in the literary creations. The Indigenous American literature is the counter narrative that resists the cultural imposition. Sherman Alexie is a prominent Native American writer of the present times. His uncompromising novels and short stories have created a sensation in the American literary arena, as they are sharp and poignant. His second novel *Indian Killer* is a haunting one, which deals with the diffusion of racial tension between the whites and natives in contemporary Seattle with the brutal serial killings and scalping of white men. Throughout the novel Alexie writes about the indigenous sovereignty and shows extreme resistance by combating the false American Indian identity. And this paper attempts to explore the resistance against hybridity in the text and preservation of indigenous sovereignty in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*.

Key Words: Indigenous American Literature, Tribes, Native Americans, Cultural Imposition, indigenous sovereignty, Hybridity, Resistance.

America has been a land of diverse cultures, practices, languages and landscapes even before the arrival of European settlers. And the plurality of cultural practices and the indigenous sovereignty have been constantly questioned by the colonizers since the day one of early European settlements in the American continent. From the days of Indian Removal Act 1830 to Indian Citizen Act 1924 Native Americans have faced the worst phases of bloodshed, dislocation and cultural imposition. Right from the colonial era to this current post-colonial setting the voice of dissent or resistance has been setting the tone of any indigenous writing. The primary concern of any indigenous literature is to advocate the sovereignty of their culture and ethnicity. Just like the literature from other settler colonies, Native American writing's major tool of resistance and preserving sovereignty is their continuous references to the cultural and ethnic intricacies.

Hybridity, in general, refers to a combination of two or more entities. In the racial and the cultural context, it deals with the transcultural or interracial identity produced. Hybridization occurs in different forms. Race, culture, language, religion are some of the major arenas where hybridization happens. Restricting to the cultural and racial aspects hybridity is merely the

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coming together of two different racial or cultural traits and creating a new third space. Giving a new or adding meaning to the already existing symbols, myths, rituals, beliefs and ideas are the possible outcome of hybridity.

Sherman Alexie, an important contemporary Native American writer, who has totally a different view about hybridity in connection with indigenous writings. In his novel, *Indian Killer*, Alexie lavishly registers his dissent through the incidents and his characters. He is basically a poet and a famous short story writer. His first novel *Reservation Blues*(1995), received a wider attention in the Native American literary sphere. Leslie Marmon Silko, a prolific native American novelist, admires Sherman Alexie as, “On this big Indian reservation we call ‘the United States’, Sherman Alexie is one of the best writers we have” (CLC 96; pg. no: 15).

Indian killer (1996) is the second novel of Alexie, which has created a wave in the American literature because of its brave attempt to speak about the controversial subject of racism and the effects of colonization so explicitly. It is a mystery novel set in Seattle, in which a so called native serial killer is killing the white men and scalps them all. The killer also leaves the feather of owl at the crime scenes in all cases. Scalping the white men and leaving the blood stained owl feather behind convinces everyone to believe that the killer is a Native Indian. The story basically revolves around the schizophrenic John Smith. John Smith is a native Indian by birth but separated from his mother right after his birth. He is immediately adapted and raised up by a rich white couple so dearly. But as he grows older he understands the difference between his parents and him. From then he grows to be mentally unstable. He has a problem with his identity and often behaves like a possessed man because of the recurrent wild dreams of a desert and a native Indian catholic father, whom he met when he was young.

John Smith is a murder suspect in the novel. Along with John, Marie Polatkin, a young Spokane Indian woman attending University in Seattle is suspected for the murder of the white men. She is a bold young lady who confronts her professor Dr. Mather. She also runs campaigns against the racial discrimination and fights for her freedom. She organizes powwow dancing, a traditional and ritual tribal dance, as a tool of resistance inside the university campus. The next suspect in the story is Reggie Polatkin, who is the cousin of Marie. Reggie is abused both physically and psychologically by his white father, who has tried to cast out the Indian trait from him. The novel is filled with sharp criticism against the white supremacy. The serial killing provokes unrest in the city between the whites and the natives, which primarily poisoned by the radio host Truck Schultz. During the end of the novel John Smith kills himself. Marie and Reggie do not kill the white men. But Alexie does not disclose the killer even in the end. The so called Indian killer never seems to cease the killings.

Both native and white characters of Alexie in the novel are carefully constructed. He has portrayed in such a way that every single white character in the novel continues to colonize the natives, whereas all the native characters protest to uphold their native pride. John Smith, the central figure of the story represents the major section of the native Indians. His separation from his biological mother and being adapted into a white family, where he is brought up as a white Christian, symbolizes the Indians, who have been driven away from their entitled lands into wilderness and confining them in reservations. Reservations and Christianisation, according to Alexie, are institutionalized cultural imposition, which breeds hybridity. This is a mortal attack on the indigenous sovereignty.

The attack against the Christianisation in *Indian Killer* is obvious. In the conversation between young John and Father Duncan Alexie has torn the Christian evangelicals into pieces.

‘Was Jesus an Indian?’ asked John... ‘He wasn’t an Indian,’ said the Jesuit, ‘but he should have been’... He knew that Jesus was killed because he was dangerous, because he wanted change the world in a good way. He also knew that the Jesuits were killed because they were dangerous to the Indians who didn’t want their world to change at all. Duncan knew those Jesuits that they were changing the Indians in a good way... ‘Did they die like Jesus?’ John asked again. Duncan was afraid to answer the question. As a Jesuit, he knew those priests were martyred just like Jesus. As a Spokane Indian, he knew those Jesuits deserved to die for their crimes against Indians. (15)

John longs to find his biological mother and his family. He does not feel family in Smith’s house. He wants to trace his tribal identity and wants call him a Spokane, or some other Indian tribe. In the story the Smiths appear to be harmless outwardly. They even plan to up bring John as an Indian. But Alexie is against even the subtlest aspect of colonization in the name of family, God or anything. John is portrayed both as a protestor and a victim. He represents the colonized indigenous people who are victimized, dislocated, lost, and fighting for their boundaries and identity. “Stuart Christie says that John Smith’s ‘mental illness represents... the despair and hopelessness engendered by cross-cultural American-Indian identities (Native American Literatures: An Introduction, 168).” According to Alexie they are doomed to the worst eternally as John Smith kills himself at the end of the story. Moreover John can be compared with Junior Polatkin, in *Reservation Blues*. They both commit suicide at the end.

The second and the most important Indian character in the novel is Marie Polatkin. She is the mouth piece of Sherman Alexie himself. She protests for her and for people. “Indians were always protesting something. Marie had organized the powwow as a protest and against the University’s refusal to allow a powwow (33).” She is very bold and fights when the Indians and their culture are taken for granted. “She seemed exotic and impossibly bold, speaking to a college professor with such disdain and disrespect (61).” She argues with her professor and anthropologist Dr. Mather when he draws the reading list wrong with ambiguous Indian writers and so called Indian writer, Jack Wilson, whose native identity is questionable.

‘I only challenge when you’re wrong. You just happen to be wrong about Wilson. I mean, we need the casinos. It’s not like we’re planning a rebellion. We’re just putting food in our cupboards. If eating is rebellious, then I guess we’re the biggest rebels out there. Indians are just plain hungry. Not for power. Not for money. For food, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Wilson doesn’t know anything about that. You don’t know anything about that.’ (84)

Marie even turns down David Rogers, her classmate, who is sympathetic with her. She does not want him to sympathize with her. She offends him intentionally. She even does reverse discrimination. She protests against Jack Wilson and stands for the sovereignty of the Indians and their culture and against any adulterations or compromises in the culture, practice or beliefs. She is of the view that the whites can never understand what the Indians actually go through. Marie represents the educated Native Indians, who want to preserve the intellectual sovereignty and Native Indian originality.

Reggie, though an abused man since childhood grows to be promising student. But the white hierarchical community dictates him. When Dr. Mather tries to use the early documentations of the grand old Indian woman for his personal benefit, Reggie confronts him, which eventually ends up in hitting Dr. Mather hard and being expelled from the university. Then he later turns to be an outcast that drags him to involve in disruptive deeds. If John represents one section of Indians, Reggie represents a different section of Indians who have been pushed into violence and usually end up in death or prison.

On the contrary the white characters in the story represent all the aspects of colonizers but in different degrees. Daniel and Olivia Smith appear to be very nice people. But Alexie projects their attributes as the agreeable way of colonizing. “They are loving and kind, and dutiful parents. When John becomes mentally unstable, they seek medical care for him... What white arrogance, therefore, do they perpetuate? Hafen Calls Olivia and Daniel Smith “well-meaning individuals who...want to possess us [Natives] in the name of rescuing us (Native American Literatures: An Introduction, 168).”

Dr. Mather is a wannabe Indian, who claims to know more about the Indians and has been brought up in an Indian family. Alexie clearly pictures his intentions behind his being nice with Indians. Firstly, he wants to do it for his reputation. But on a larger sense he tries to generalize or attempts to loot what originally belongs to the Indians. He uses Reggie to meet his personal needs, but shows his white hierarchy when he does not respond to him as before. He shows his true colours, when Reggie is expelled from the University. It is a common attribute of the colonizers. Alexie’s selection of this name is a quite significant one. He purposefully selects the names of the predators, who drove the Indians away from their lands. “The name Clarence Mather is also a name cribbed from early American history. The Calvinist Cotton Mather believed that he had an errand from the Lord to purify the wilderness, to gather the elect into a covenant community, and to redeem or destroy the Natives (Native American Literatures: An Introduction, 168).”

Jack Wilson, the so called Indian, does not have any proof to prove his Indian identity. He again like Mather wants to make fortune as a writer in the name of Indian. Wilson is also a historical figure but used in an ironical way. He does not do any good to the Indians rather he misuses it to provoke violence through his writings and they are not authentic. Marie says, “Wilson’s novels ‘have an influence on the Indian Killer... But I do think books like Wilson’s actually commit violence against Indians (264).” Truck Schultz is the represents the real face of colonialism as he provokes the violence and longs to own everything. Suzanne puts it as,

Although numerous whites in the novel continue to colonize Natives, four characters in particular represent contemporary colonizing tendencies...Dr. Clarence Mather, Jack Wilson... Daniel and Olivia Smith... So often colonizers assume they know what is best for tribal peoples. White arrogance coupled with naiveté humiliates Natives. (Native American Literatures: An Introduction, 168)

Alexie is against all the transcultural arguments because he is of the view that the oppressed or the colonized become lost in the process of hybridity. He vehemently attacks the mixing of races, which further suffocates the Natives. “White people, especially those with the most minute amount of tribal blood, thought they became Indian just by saying they were Indian...Those mixed-blood writers never admitted their pale skin was a luxury (232).” Alexie writes, “...ONLY INDIANS SHOULD TELL INDIAN STORIES (263).” Similar reference is

found in Alexie's first novel *Reservation Blues*, where the Coyote Springs' chance is given to Betty and Veronica, who knew nothing about the Indians by the Calvary Studio and the song never sounds like Indian.

In *Indian Killer* Alexie does not just glorify the myth and the mystic elements in the Indian community. He takes the present issue of cultural and racial discrimination. He attempts to decolonize the colonized and lost Native Indian community. Of course the process of decolonizing is violent and radical but they are not as afflicting as the process of colonization. According to him preserving or advocating cultural homogeneity is the first step to decolonize the indigenous community. So he invariably attacks all the aspects of colonization to resist hybridization, which would dilute the cultural singleness and would eventually end up in identity crisis, dislocation and oppression. So, Alexie resists even a smaller attributes of colonialism to perpetuate and preserve the homogeneity and sovereignty by resisting hybridity in cultural, linguistic, racial and religious aspects.

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