

Enlightenment and Reconciliation in ‘The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian’ And ‘Flight’

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"I write about the kind of Indian I am: kind of mixed up, kind of odd, not traditional. I'm a rez kid who's gone urban"

- Sherman Alexie.

I. Introduction

Sherman Alexie is one of the most prolific Native American writers of the modern age. His works deal with Native American life especially their life on the reservation. He depicts the lives of Native Americans and illuminates their situation of mass murder, loss of language and land rights through alcohol and other forms of self-abuse. He says "Indians are an endangered species." Through his works Alexie voices his concern for the survival of American Indians as they are more susceptible to alcoholism, accidents and deaths.

He started his literary career writing poems, short stories, novels and screen plays for films. His first poetry collection *The Business Of Fancydancing* was published in 1991 followed by *I Would Steal Horses*(1992?). His other poetry collections are *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *One Stick Song* (2000) and *Face* (2009). His first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published by Atlantic Monthly Press in 1993. This work received a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction, and was later awarded a Lila WallaceReader's Digest Writers' Award. *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) is another short story collection almost exclusively urban and white collar which Ken Foster for the San Francisco Chronicle described as having a "consistently dark comic tone." Another short story collection to be published was *Ten Little Indians* (2003)

Alexie along with Chris Eyre has written a screen play for the film *Smoke Signals*(1998) based on "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," a short story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The film produced, directed, and acted by Native American talent was released at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1998, the movie won two awards: the Audience Award and the Filmmakers Trophy. In 2002 Alexie directed a film based on his first short story *The Business of Fancydancing* which won for him numerous film festival awards. Evan Adams, who acted in both films, argues that "Sherman has managed to almost single-handedly dismantle the popular and populist image of the American Indian. He's given us a voice."

His first novel, *Reservation Blues*, published in 1995 by Atlantic Monthly Press was awarded Granta's Best of Young American Novelists and won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and the Murray Morgan Prize. His second novel, *Indian Killer*, deals with racial hatred. It was published in 1996, also by Atlantic Monthly Press, was named one of People's Best of Pages and a New York Times Notable Book.

Alexie along with Chris Eyre wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals* based on his short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona". This movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

The incident of September 11 changed his perspective on violence and bloodshed. This is evident in his later novels like *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* which is the first young adult novel written by Alexie. This is a semi-autobiographical novel which won him the National Book Award.

Alexie is the son of a Coeur d'Alene native American father and a Spokane native American mother. , he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, WA, about 50 miles northwest of Spokane, WA. He was born hydrocephalic. He underwent a brain operation at the age of 6 months and was not expected to survive. The doctors predicted that he would live with severe mental retardation. Anyhow, he showed side-effects such as seizures throughout his childhood. His father worked at logging and truck driving under the influence of alcoholism. His mother worked on the reservation as an addiction and youth counselor.

As a teenager he took the decision to move out of Wellpinit school and join an white high school in Reardan, WA about twenty miles south of Wellpinit. All of his inspired his experiences are recounted in his first young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. In 1985 Alexie got admitted to Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA, on a scholarship. After two years at Gonzaga, he attended Washington State University (WSU) in Washington. Just one year after he left WSU, his first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I*

Would Steal Horses, were published.

Alexie is surely the first native American ever to have been physically embraced by a serving president of the United States (Bill Clinton) and told, "Sherman - you're fucking funny!" Granta and the New Yorker have both placed him on lists of best young American writers.

He lives in Seattle, Washington with his wife and two sons.

Alexie perceived alcoholism as a symptom of a disease called poverty and political oppression.

The protagonist Arnold Spirit in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is a fourteen year old Native American boy born and brought in miserable circumstances in the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit. He was living in poor surroundings; his father was an alcoholic and the family was dependent on his mother for its livelihood. One day he threw the geometry text book on the face of his white teacher in the reservation school, Mr. P. advises him to take troubles to join an all whites school in Rearden some 22 miles away from the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit.

Zits is the protagonist in 'Flight'. He is a fifteen year old teenager who is a half-Native American orphan. He wakes up in a new foster home which is his twenty-first one. His father disappeared when he was born and his Irish mother died when he was six year old.

He left his foster home after a confrontation and he is arrested by police Officer namely, Dave. He was put in a juvenile holding cell where he meets Justice, a white boy with whom he forged friendship. Justice acted as a philosopher to Zits and he teaches Zits how to shoot guns and exhorts him to shoot customers standing in the lobby of a bank. Zit is then transported back in time to several different periods of American violence. In each transformation, he reincarnates into different individuals, mainly historical in nature.

Firstly, Zits is transported back in time to the 1970s in the body of Hank Storm, an FBI agent who witnesses the murder of a young Native American man by his FBI partner, Art. Zits is pressured into shooting the young man's corpse, and thereby confronted with the guilt of his own crime at the bank. Zits' second transformation leads him into the body of a young Indian boy at the Battle of Little Bighorn, in 1876. When his father tells him to kill a white soldier Zits chooses not to strike. Thirdly, Zits inhabits the body of Gus a 19th century Indian tracker with the U.S. Calvary. Gus leads an attack on a camp of Indians but Zits forces the body to help save a young boy whom he names Bow Boy. Zits' fourth transformation finds him as Jimmy, an adulterous pilot who mourns the loss of his best friend, Abbad. Jimmy taught Abbad how to fly and Abbad proved to be a terrorist, killing many people by flying a plane into downtown Chicago. It is assumed that this transformation occurs after 09/11. Zits has less control over Jimmy's body than he had in previous transformations and so simply watches as Jimmy's wife Linda finds him with his mistress. After Linda kicks him out of the house, Jimmy commits suicide by crashing his plane into ocean. Zits thinks of seeing in father and mother then before he dies. Zits' final transformation is into the body of his father, a homeless and alcoholic. He realizes that his father too suffered from a lifetime of pain and disappointment. Zits is now back in his own body standing in the lobby of the bank before he opened fire. He leaves the bank. Police Officer Dave finds Zits a new foster home with his brother Robert and sister-in-law Mary. At first, Zits is reluctant to trust his new foster family; but they soon win him over. His hope for the future is restored. The novel ends with the suggestion of a new beginning when Zits reveals to Mary that his real name is Michael.

Abstract: *The protagonist Arnold Spirit in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is a fourteen year old Native American boy born and brought up in miserable circumstances in the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit. He was living in poor surroundings; his father was an alcoholic and the family was dependent on his mother for its livelihood. One day he threw the geometry text book on the face of his white teacher in the reservation school, Mr. P. advises him to take troubles to join an all whites school in Rearden some 22 miles away from the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit. The sudden transformation happens to Zits at the end of the novel is not without any psychological basis. This transformation is the result of Zits' coming to terms with his self. It is a case of understanding his own self. He realizes that as a person he is incapable of committing any murders. He comes to accept the reality that human life is something sacred and he could not afford to waste it on racial grounds. Both Arnold and Zits work on the same level: both of them are not only trying to search out their identity but their selves are coming to terms to with themselves with a whiff of compassion unto themselves. Zits in "Flight" conveys the message that the best anti-dote to violence is the proper understanding of the self and the coming to terms with it.*

Keywords: Reservation: *It is a legal designation for area of land managed by a Native American tribe under the US Bureau of Indian Affairs.*

Trauma: a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.

Holocaust: It is a destruction or slaughter on a mass scale.

Reconcile: restore friendly relations between individuals or groups.

Redemption: the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil.

Enlightenment: state of attaining knowledge or insight or awareness.

Empathy: It is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Compassion: It is the emotion that one feels in response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help.

Foster family: the family that give a kid a safe place to live and grow.

Stereotype: a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

Multiculturalism: is the co-existence of diverse culture.

Genocide: it is the systematic destruction of all or a significant part of a racial, ethnic, religious or national group.

II. Discussion

'The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' and "Flight" are narratives of American Indian trauma and the characters bear witness to this ongoing suffering due to colonialism. The grief of the Native Americans are due to the fact that their altogether loss is never acknowledged! It is the grief of characterizing them as subhuman beings incapable of experiencing or expressing human emotions. These kinds of negative constructions of American Indians have led to the point that these helpless Indians have no right to mourn and therefore there is no need to express grief for them or empathize with.

'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is an amazing literary masterpiece about overcoming boundaries which leads to finding greater strength within. This novel portrays the struggle between the white world and the bleak Indian world. Here, hard realities punch right on the face. It is an amazing literary masterpiece about overcoming boundaries which leads to finding greater strength within. This novel portrays the struggle between the white world and the bleak Indian world. Here, hard realities punch right on the face.

Arnold in 'The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' not only struggles a lot to reconcile the multiple layers of his identity but also eventually comes out with a unified personality amalgamating the traits of divergent worlds into a complete or harmonious identity. Arnold discovers or formulates his individuality only after establishing peer relationships in Rearden school. Later the norms of his Indian community are also blended with his newly found individuality. This naturally paves the way for the creation or birth of his identity. Thus, in the case of the identity of Arnold one element cannot be separated from the other. Thus "The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" is a typical young adult novel highlighting the importance of establishing a complete individual after balancing the divergent traits with in and with out the protagonist.

Both Arnold and Zits work on the same level: both of them are not only trying to search out their identity but their selves are coming to terms to with themselves with a whiff of compassion unto themselves.

This is the first Young Adult Novel written by Sherman Alexie. The narrative starts by recounting the problems in the reservation like poverty aggravated by alcoholism and drug abuse. There arises conflicts once the protagonist, Arnold takes decision to join the white school at Rearden. There upon he has to face resistance which started building up from both sides, from the reservation and from the Rearden school. For the first time in his life, Arnold began to feel the two worlds which are totally different from each other. He is viewed as a traitor by his community in reservation. He has to face racial discrimination from white school. He felt as if he has not really fitting in well with the given situation. Thereby, Arnold started to write his diary chronicling the various conflicts that he had to face during the freshman year of high school. Besides these conflicts Arnold is experiencing some tragic losses also in the form of accidental deaths and murders of his near ones in the reservation. In spite of all these clashes and sufferings happening in these two worlds this silver lining of this novel is the reconciliation that ensures the identity of Arnold in his community. Another striking feature of this novel is the reality and authenticity in the narration of various incidents.

There is a central paradox in this narrative. Arnold does not leave the reservation for ever. It is just like an internship that a student undertakes. After getting required skill one course participant just comes out of the educational institution. Likewise, the white school where Arnold has now joined is only one stage for future career development of Arnold. It only helps him or any other person who gets enrolled in Rearden school with advanced educational facilities. Altogether, Arnold left the reservation school only to come back later with renewed vigour and vitality. His departure to Rearden school is only to come back later with more acquisition of knowledge and skill. His educational task is actually an exploration to straddle two seemingly opposing worlds, the Indian world and the white world. Anyhow Arnold's attempt in this way serves as a best model for other young adults of Indian reservations to rely upon.

In 'Flight' the experiences of the hero, Zits, encompasses the trauma of American Indians since colonialism of Euro-Americans. Zits undertakes time travel into historical periods where he reincarnates into different individuals and interacts with past Indian leaders like Crazy Horse and so on. There is violence and bloodshed throughout the course of the novel, 'Flight'. Zits has the vision of a scene in the lobby of a Seattle bank where he shoots down customers indiscriminately. The, he realizes that he had not killed any one else and he could not have killed a single human being. Zits comes to realize the sacredness of life and he could only show respect and consideration to it. In contrast, Arnold in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is

not at all troubled by trauma of a colonial past. In both these novels, 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' and 'Flight' reconciliation marks the final stages of the novel. The reconciliation as seen in 'Flight' gets an added appeal that it takes place, more over, in the mind of the hero.

Zits in "Flight" conveys the message that the best anti-dote to violence is the proper understanding of the self and the coming to terms with it.

He is ready to forget the humiliation he experienced as an orphan changing place from one foster family to the other. But in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian', there is no such process of healing a colonial trauma as seen in the case of 'Flight'. There is only the reconciliation between Arnold and Rowdy on individual plains. In contrast there is a much deeper element of redemption that the protagonist Zits undergoes in 'Flight'. In Zits the positive qualities like empathy, compassion and forgiveness are the anti-dotes for historical trauma of American Indians. But, one important aspect that passes through 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' and 'Flight' is the element of hopefulness.

The reconciliatory responses of Zits and Arnold can also be treated as steps against historical trauma suffered by American Indians resulting in accidental deaths and alcoholism. Anyhow, these are not trivial or simple things viewed against the background of unresolved grief manifested as generations of racism and oppression since the arrival of Columbus and "European conquest of the Americas" Marie Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra De Bruyn in "The American...")

The only similarity between 'Flight' and 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' are in the element of hopefulness with which these two novels come to an end. But, 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' records less of trauma of American Indians than 'Flight'. 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is the autobiographical notes of a disgruntled American Indian teenager, Arnold since he started suffering racial discrimination in Rearden school and detachment from his own community members. But, in 'Flight', the protagonist Zits' sufferings of trauma are of those of the generations of grief suffered by American Indians. The anguish of Zits is of historical plane rather than on individual plane. The anger and violence as in Zits' character is the manifestation of the "intense historical unresolved grief"(Lisa Poupart). This is the rage against the dominant Euro-American culture which perpetrated the "worst genocide" of Native American people in history(Alexie's reply to Ase Nygren). But, this dominant culture has invalidated their grief, rage and even denied the chances for expression of their grief. What we see in 'Flight' is the expression of the grief, depression, anger, anxiety and other violent reactions. The identity of such an American Indian who is product of historical trauma of America is part and parcel of that historical trauma which is associated with genocide of First Nation people.

The identity of Zits, unlike that of Arnold in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian', cannot be divorced from the pain suffered by American Indians(Alexie to Ase Nygren). 'Flight', just like his earlier novel, 'Indian Killer', is a narrative of trauma suffered by his characters who are the indigenous people of America.

These sufferings and anguish cannot be separated from the trauma or grief suffered by their forefathers. Hence, their sufferings is a representation of the sufferings of the American Indians in general.

Arnold in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' seems to be nurturing a cosmopolitan outlook. He is a part-time Indian travelling to and fro between the reservation and the white world in the all white world in the all white school at Rearden. Eventually, he does not seem to be torn between these two opposing world. He could easily adopt himself to the requirements of the changing environments of the reservation and the all white school. There is positive quality and a light in his eyes when he looks at these different worlds of diverse cultural values. He proves that one could amalgamate the positive aspects of these cultural diversities of multi-culturalism.

Both Arnold and Zits are hopeful of human beings. This is evident when they face with a situation where they are to orient themselves. Arnold need not bother about reviving his old friendship with Rowdy who had severely beaten him up in the face. Arnold suffered lot of physical and mental pain while participating in the basketball match against his old school in the Spokane reservation.

Arnold has a vast store house of tolerance evidenced in suffering ignominities from Rowdy. At the end of the novel, he calls Arnold a nomad when he approaches Rowdy extending a hand of friendship at the end of the novel. Anyhow, Rowdy finally accepts the fact that Arnold has joined the all whites school at Rearden. These all denoted the level of tolerance and the hope that Arnold has about mankind. Arnold is not at all disappointed at any stage in trying out the friendship with Rowdy. Although he gets rebutted in the act, Arnold could make reconciliation with Rowdy after he accepts the fact that Arnold has joined the all whites school at Rearden.

It is his hope in people and human life that drives him to join Rearden school by incurring the displeasure and aversion from his community including his intimate friend Rowdy. His parents are fearful of adverse reactions from the reservation but they permitted him as they are fully convinced of self-determination and they self-reliance, the ideal so dear to vital to American dream.

In 'The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian', Arnold Spirit comes to terms with his own identity. Here, Alexie, as in the case of collected stories of 'Ten Little Indians', refutes the notion of the whites that Native Americans are groping in the dark without any identity of their own. Thus Alexie very effectively challenges the stereotype that whites have about the First Nation people.

Members of his Indian community called him Junior and an 'apple' after he joined the all whites school in Rearden. He is called 'apple' because he is coloured white inside a red skin. But, at the end people in reservation like Rowdy come to accept that Arnold is after all the old Junior whose colour of the skin and the inner core never clash with each other. Both the outer surface and inner core of his person are same.

Although he is caught in two worlds of the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington state and Rearden School, Arnold could feel each world in his veins. He could perceive and understand the differing worlds in his mind. He faces lot of challenges by joining the basketball team of Rearden school. The visit of Rearden basket ball team to his former school to play match against Rowdy's team of reservation school of Wellpinit is actually a way of re-establishing the broken connection with his community in reservation. The process gets started with lot of set backs in the form of Rowdy severely beating up Arnold in the face. They suffered defeat from the hands of his old school team with Rowdy as the star player of the team. Rearden basket ball team again came back for a re-match against the reservation team. Again, Rowdy was there trying to thwart all of Arnold's moves at the court. Both

Arnold and Rowdy played as if they are the greatest enemies on the earth. Arnold dared to persistently carry out these experiences incurring lot of difficulties and inconveniences to him. But, at the end this bears fruits to his when Rowdy, eventually, accepts the fact that Arnold was studying in the all whites school at Rearden. This leads both of them to the road of reconciliation. It can be presumed that Arnold gets enlightenment of the both worlds on and off the reservation. He feels empathy towards his people in reservation and his friends in reservation school. That feeling of fraternity is something great for Arnold.

Rearden School for Arnold is not a symbol of emancipation or any retreat. It represents only one stage in the educational life of Arnold. He joined there only to avail good education to him. Also, Rearden school has given him intellectual life besides friendship with Roger, Penelope and Gordy. It does not mean that he had totally rejected his old world of reservation which has given him community and family life, love and friendship with people like Rowdy. His journeys connect both these diverse worlds. He goes away to Rearden only to come back again later. He is a connecting link between these seemingly irresistible and diverse worlds. He cannot do away with any of these worlds: the dark world of Spokane Indian reservation and the white world of Rearden school. He is Junior in the dark world of reservation and Arnold Spirit in the white world. This reincarnation into two roles is successfully performed by Junior and Arnold respectively.

The protagonist is the same person to the outside world. But below the surface there are two worlds. There is clash between Indian reservation and Rearden school. Arnold daily come back from Rearden school to his reservation after class hours. He cannot forget that he is an Indian and being an inhabitant of that place he wish to spend most of his time with his own people in reservation as in earlier times. He has actively come down to his roots because it gives him his persona. It is his existential responsibility to find out his self. These journeys from Rearden also serve to assert his identity as an Indian. He changes himself into a multi-tribal individual only by keeping in touch with his former self in the reservation. Nobody can effect a change unless rooted in one thing or another. Arnold's one foot is kept on the reservation and the other one is kept on the Rearden school. Now, he is trying to place his third step on a new ground.

Arnold tries to boost up his level of hope by preparing a 'Hope List'. This list consists of his favourite things in life which brings him joy.

He joined Rearden school only to escape from the hopelessness of reservation. Comparative study of the element of struggle in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' and in 'Indian Killer' reveal that Arnolds efforts are to reconcile the two disparate worlds of reservation and Rearden school, the dark and the white worlds respectively. This reconciliation is not confined to reconciliation between individuals like Arnold and Rowdy. It is the reconciliation between varying cultures; the American Indian culture and the domineering Euro-American culture. And one can reach out to other world only after stamping on another ground. Arnold leaves reservation not permanently. He goes to the all whites school at Rearden only in search of an opportunity or possibly to escape from the wretched world of reservation. He goes to Rearden school after walking up twenty two kilometers and come back in the evening after class hours. He makes a departure from one place to the other only to come back later. So, Arnold cannot despise one place by comparing with the other. By shuttling between the two worlds of reservation and Rearden he remains as a part-time Indian. This means that his overall identity is the identity of an Indian. This is his basic identity; basically he is an Indian. Becomes a part-time Indian only after joining Rearden school. But, his schooling is not for ever. It may come to an end after a few years. So, the word part-time Indian in the title of the novel is signifying Arnold's struggle to reconcile his disparate experiences in the reservation and in Rearden school.

Arnold is caught between two worlds and his success in life naturally depends on reconciling these two worlds.

III. Conclusion

'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian' is an instance of instructing the power of positive thinking in changing the destinies of human beings. We can affect lot of changes on our course of life depending upon our mental programming. This is an illustration of the American Dream come true. It is a novel about hope. The identity that Arnold forges is not the identity of a 'rez kid' or a student of Rearden school; but it is a new kind identity created simultaneously with the process of reconciliation and enlightenment. Pith self-determination Arnold fights against all odds in his life because he has hope in life and in human beings. This has finally led him to the great heights of reconciliation and enlightenment. He has hope since he has belief in himself. He is optimistic in that

things can later change in a positive way. There were times when seemed to collapse in front of myriad forms of obstacle on his way of life. But, e squarely dealt with all those things by anchoring on his innate strength of character. He fights back clasping firmly the horns of the charging bull.

But, Arnold is fully conscious that his identity as an Indian cannot be discarded or denied by anyone; it is all there on his skin, culture, mind and overall physique. This is the reason he suffers all indignities heaped by Rowdy. Arnold can feel the multi-cultural world is spending his time. But, deep below the outer layer he knows that he is fully an Indian. The only thing left out to him is the reconstruction of his American Indian identity to present before the world.

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