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## **Indigenous World: A Critical Study of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***

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### **Abstract:**

Native American Literature has come a long way from being buried within Anthropological section to becoming a prominent voice of the natives of the land.

Awarded the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, *The Absolutely True Story of a Part- Time Indian* is a saga of the tribulations of being a native teenager with a resilient heart. Arnold Junior relates the drudgery of native people living on reservations- the real life scenario of almost every native person who steps into the world of the white world to have his own identity The plight of colonization is revealed in the aftermath of the native tribes which have become home of a lost heritage and life The paper explores what it means to defy your native world of drudgery while surviving as the "other" in the non-native world.. He voices out the importance of indigenous identity and the need to be resilient to maintain it in its real milieu. Alexie's survival spirit of indigenous continuance, however conflicted, is at the heart of his art.

**Keywords: Indigenism, Survivance, Resilience, Realism.**

Marginalized societies are an interesting means to study any country's socio-political mechanisms in real world settings. The Native Americans are those marginalized sections of Indigenous peoples who inhabited the American land even before the advent of Columbus. The European colonization took away their identity making them 'vanished entities'. Yet there generations survived through colonial rule by acculturation and assimilation. Referred to as "Native Americans" or "American Indians" their history and literature is as resilient as their war heroes, their culture and undying spirit. Christopher Columbus gave the then natives the title of 'Indian, mistaking the land as East India.. The misnomer has continued to serve a kind of racial / cultural for these autochthonous people. Though the unitary idea of 'Indian' was not approved by most indigenous peoples, who saw themselves as diverse, it gave the European colonizers a fixed

person who could be labeled as “primitive “or “heathen”, legally bounding or restraining them geographically away from their own land in lifeless soils termed as “reservations”.

My paper discusses the different aftermaths of colonialism surrounding Native American world namely: Reservation realism, white guilt, poverty, alcoholism, Tolerance which has sadly become their identity.

The protagonist is a fourteen year old teenager, Arnold Spirit, also known as Junior who through his sketches and personal anecdotes presents the trajectory of native people. In spite of his physical ailments caused by Hydrophalus, he decides to break away from the miserable life as a Native American at the Wellpinit reservation and study at an all white school which gives him hope and a fresh view of the world while demonstrating a realism of reservation life According to Sarah .A. Quirk, “Alexie throughout his works tend to ask three rhetorical questions: What does it mean to live as an Indian in this time? What does it mean to be an Indian man? Finally, what does it mean to live on an Indian reservation?”(298)

Distortion of Native American images has wrongly formed Native American's identity.. Sherman Alexie, in this semi-autobiographical work has opposed this distortion by vocalizing and presenting his own image of the contemporary American Indian characters using slices of their life, their anxieties, worries and humorous anecdotes. He uses popular culture, Indian beliefs and drudgery of poverty-ridden reservation life through a resilient postcolonial means to create his story. The quest for an accepted and respected native identity has been the overriding theme in almost all native works. The novel begins with a description of the physical problems Junior has to succumb to as a result of hydro phallus. Alexie uses humor as a means to describe the grievous physical conditions such as lifelong seizures, poor eyesight, brain damage, big hands and feet, enormous skull along with stutter and lisp. All this lead him to be ridiculed as a retard that is always beaten up or bullied by everyone young or old in the reservation. His acceptance of his physical weakness is remarkably presented in his humorous description of all the abuses he faces. In spite of all this, junior comes across as a strong and ambitious teenager who finds solace in his cartoon drawings, readings and his best friend Rowdy .He writes, “I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods and my cartoons are tiny lifeboats.”(6).

Sherman presents the real life problems of reservation life on the Wellpinit reservation which is a saga of unending tribulations..The poverty that overshadows them in contrast to the expensive health services provided on the reservation is a reality slice of every lopsided

government funded medical schemes for Indian reservations. Right from getting his extra teeth pulled wherein the dentist gives only half Novocain and pulls out all the extra teeth at once is a humorous but ironic anecdote. The pitiful scenario becomes evident when sick Oscar, Junior's dog is killed with a bullet by his father as they can neither see it suffering nor afford medical services. Junior reveals their helplessness when he writes, "A bullet only costs about two cents, and anybody can afford that" (14).

Moreover, the tribal dynamics of Spokane, its people, their ideologies is well pointed out through Junior's experiences. The annual powwow celebration, held over the labor day which Junior visits with Rowdy, his best friend is a befitting glance at the Spokane life celebration with "singing, war dancing, gambling, storytelling, laughter, fry bread, hamburgers, hot dogs, arts and crafts, and plenty of alcoholic brawling"(17). His relation with Rowdy is exemplary of every teenager life dynamics. Their love for comic, mutual understandings even in repulsive times reveals the close companionship present in the Spokane tribe. The idea of all white school is repulsive to Rowdy as he believes he would lose his friend to the outside world. Later, when they face each other as opponents in school Basketball team and rowdy losses, their relationship stands the test of time. The close knit relations and its dynamics is presented beautifully through their relation.

The dynamics of close family bonds, acceptances of others despite their shortcomings speaks volumes about the worth of communal harmony which gives one a sense of belonging and identity. The beauty of American Indians lies in their acceptance of their failures, enjoying life amidst misery while being resilient to every opposing situation. Junior's love for his drunkard and often absent father whose unselfish faulty love finds description in incidents when he saves money instead of spending it on alcohol to give it to his son as a gift. Also, as a father, he supports his son, junior's decision to go to an all white school outside the reservation in spite of it being a taboo among Indians. Junior never despises his alcoholic parents instead he enumerates their potentials. He is aware that they were capable of better things but the vicious cycle of life on the poor reservation deprived them of what they could have been-his intelligent mother as a college professor and his father, a world renowned singer of which he draws a cartoon to depicts to us readers the hopeful gracious image of his family. His love for his sister and grandmother is again a means to showcase the great wisdom and potentiality each hold but which could never be fully achieved as his sister becomes a recluse after high school while his

grandmother dies eventually of sickness. Yet, both prove instrumental in making him understand the challenging reservation life and leave him with a better and mature understanding to cope with every dismal situation.

I use the term “material Realism” to analyse poverty in Indian life hood. The concept of material realism, according to me, is a very reliable means to identify poverty. Junior acknowledges poverty as “It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor....And because you’re Indian you start believing that you are destined to be poor. It’s an ugly circle and there is nothing you can do about it (13). Junior gives the definition of poverty as: “POVERTY = empty refrigerator + empty stomach”(8). It is also reflected in the “old, old, old descript book” reference of the geometry book belonging to his mother. He receives it from the school as part of the fresh academic year. it proves to be the catalyst which makes Junior shun the native world to overcome the vicious cycle of native poverty The comic sketches he draws include description of the clothes, their source etc itself explains indigenous poverty extremes. At Rearden School he feels lonely and isolated as he is the only Indian. His appearance, clothes, dialect everything makes him feel “like somebody had showed me into a rocket ship and blasted me to a new planet. I was a freaky alien and there was absolutely no way to get home” (66) For Halloween Junior dresses up as a homeless dude and presents the irony saying:

At school today, I went dressed as a homeless dude. It was a pretty easy costume for me. There is not much difference between my good and bad clothes, so I pretty much look half homeless anyway. (77)

What is remarkable is how he uses his odds in favor while accepting conditions and looks for ways to mend them. Junior’s resilient attitude presents the survivance of Native American resilient spirit. He lies about his Halloween clothes saying, “I am wearing this to protest the treatment of homeless Native Americans in this country.(78)”. Yet, he never lets poverty overcome his sense of honor when he uses money to buy lunch. “We were poor enough to get free lunch, but I dint want to be the only Indian and a sad sack who needed charity” (55). Eventually he makes his own identity through his capabilities as an intelligent student and a good basketball player in the white school. As opposed to the European concept of “material wealth = richness”, Junior uses his personal capabilities as means to gain what he desires. Thus strongly advocating faith in

potentiality instead of material supremacy. The sketches too present the dilemma and situation often poor people face which is painted in humor.

Alexie depicts the concept of “white guilt” through the character of Mr. P, a white American Math teacher at Wellpinit high school. He, in an ironic way, motivated Junior to leave the reservation to change his destiny .With a sketch of Mr. P. and brief description of the teacher’s everyday habits and incidents, Alexie gives a glimpse of the non-native white American indifferent attitude towards the natives. The incident with Mr. P proves to be the anagnorsis moment when he gets his own mother’s geometry book to study. His excitement of studying geometry is replaced by repulsion of the dire poverty of the lives when he says:

Yep, so that means I was staring at geometry book that was at least thirty years older than I was.

I couldn’t believe it.

How horrible is that?

My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world (31)

The interaction between Mr. P and Junior after his suspension is a confession of the vicious pattern of assimilation and appropriation methods used by white Americans who were used as puppets at the hands of colonizers. When Mr. P mentions: “We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child. . . We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren’t trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.”(35)

Another practice of “white guilt” is the exotic reverence non natives express towards the tribal culture and life. Sherman expresses his dismay by narrating the humorous account of the stranger’s visit at his grandmother’s funeral who professes his love for Indians and brings a powwow dance costume to return, believing it to be grandmother’s. His desire to be loved by is met with a mortifying disclosure by junior’s mom who reveals that “Grandmother Spirit wasn’t a powwow dancer” and also asserts that “In fact, looking at the beads and design, this doesn’t look Spokane at all. . . It looks more Sioux to me” (165).Junior’s disgust is evident when he says:

Do you know how many white strangers show up on Indian reservations every year and start telling Indians how much they love them?

Thousands

It's sickening.

And boring. (162)

An America that would erase its First nations could be revolutionized by Indians who assert themselves against vanishing. Alexie's existential expression of Indigenous continuance, however conflicted, is at the heart of his art.(qtd in Moore, 298). The pursuit of identity has the undying desire for good life. But colonialism and its aftermath had left such scars that native Indians have accepted their hopeless reservation life as the only way of life. Opposing this, Mr. P reveals the nonchalant disappointing attitude of natives when he says, "You were right to throw that book on me. I deserved to get smashed in the face. . . .but let me tell you this. All the Indians should get smashed too. The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up. "(42)

Tolerance is another key aspect which helps the reservation Indians to survive while being perseverant about their culture and history. Junior is fascinated by all the glories Native American heroes like the Crazy Horse and the like achieved. Indigenous people were the ones who practiced tolerance and continue to do so even after losing their lands, religion, culture and identity. Yet, they believe in tolerance and acceptance which is reflected in Grandmother whom Junior describes as "My grandmother's greatest gift was tolerance... (78) which is that of every native Indian who lives on the reservations which houses more number of accidental deaths and their funerals, failed parental roles, alcoholism and its resultant fights and parental indifference, scarcity of food, quality education and means to achieve it.

When Junior says "Of course, ever since white people showed up and brought along their Christianity and their fear of eccentricity, Indians have gradually lost all of their tolerance", he is pointing to the white men's beliefs and thoughts which have got engrained deeply in The native mind as a part of colonization. The stereotypes which the non-natives use for natives have become the accepted reality of native people. This loss of identity is what Sherman Alexie tries hard to evade through his works, humor and irony in the form of Junior's remark: "Indians can be just as judgmental and hateful as any white person" (155).

"I used to think the world was broken down by tribes. By black and white. By Indian and white. But I know that isn't true. The world is only broken into two tribes: the people who are assholes

and the people who are not” (176). The use of foul language, “dirty talks”, abusive parenting like Rowdy’s leaves less hope for its young minds. Yet, Alexie depicts it all in hope that someday when a young boy or girl reads his work, he/she may be filled with hope to find his/her own path even in dire situations. Junior finds his path and understands life’s metaphysical entity when he reflects on his situations:

I mean I’d always been the lowest Indian on the reservation totem pole-I wasn’t expected to do good so I wasn’t. But in Rearden, my coach and other players wanted me to be good. They expected me to be good. And so I became good. (180)

I feel like I have something to prove to the people in Rearden, the people in Wellpinit, and to myself” (186).

The ironic win of Junior only to feel defeated, presents the dilemma of every native individual as he goes forward in his individual advancement. Even though Arnold was the hero of the fantastic game against his own people, the sadness that fills every Indian in the stadium presents how individual gain can never be fulfilling to one until he finds it worthwhile in his own world, his people. The concept of multiculturalism is acceptance of all. But often it tends to nullify the tribe of the individual while embracing him/her which is more of pretence. Actually acceptance comes with acceptance and tolerance of differences which is reflected in every native life..

As a postmodern writer, Sherman brings to his readers the belief in chance and transience. Considered to be containing autobiographical elements, the novel shows us how transfiguring life is for every unprivileged person. Here for an American Indian, the transgression resounds with that of most aboriginal writers whose characters are surrounded by the unfavouring situations yet whose survivance lead them towards creating different life, accepting the differences and embracing the universal humanitarian entity of differences. Also, he opposes the binary European perspective of good and evil, right and wrong. Though colonial power dismantled the native world yet it also became the reason for acknowledgment of native world globally. The European power has made efforts for native betterment but has its shortcomings too. Sherman’s work becomes a review of all the failing governmental projects and facilities provided as a near to truth account which makes it an important fictional work too.



Alexie pursues randomness in creative agency in his narration. The use of sketches and mathematical equations are in fact an act of embracing the Native American storytelling pattern of open-ended narration. In doing so he strengthens the native storytelling legacy which practices open-ended narration which, as Sherman said in his preface to *The Business of Fancy Dancing*: is a means to “embrace the magical and painful randomness of life (qtd in Moore 300). His aversion to narrative closure pattern is also his means to oppose the colonial closure. Most non-Indian narration about native Indians is about tragedy for Indians with colonial mourning. In doing so, he asserts the need to acknowledge the fact that natives are the better and reliable storytellers than their non- native colonizers who wrongly have been claiming credentials.

In the present scenario, we find every society and community facing problems within and their others. What Sherman gives us is how every community has its own complex beliefs and structural, social, political thoughts and ways which might not necessarily be correct. To move ahead is not to leave our world but to carry it with you and keep it up while you cross borders not to become an exile rather become a channel of connectivity with the outside world. As more and more people take up this challenge there will be more and more realistic social acceptance of opposed viewpoint. The first need is to be confident of being a deserving person for a better life, next accept differences maturely as W.B. Yeats writes: There is another world, but it is in this one” (qtd in ATDPI)

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