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Strategy of Implying Subversive Mimicry to Resist in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

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In contemporary era Native American Literature has gained a vast significance in the sphere of Marginalized literature. Different texts are widely chosen and dealt with various perspectives. This paper focuses on Reservation Blues written by a well-known Native writer Sherman Alexie to bring out the technique of using subversive mimicry as a tool to resist the colonizers. Resistance is a common note of all the marginalized literature but this work of Sherman Alexie is more enriched by tracing the resistance through subversive mimicry. Sherman Alexie (1966-) belongs to Spokane Reservation. He is a multifaceted personality who plays various roles such as the writer, teacher, activist and the public speaker. Translations of his works are available in various languages like Japanese, Punjabi, Swedish, Tamil and Hungarian etc.

Native American literature in the contemporary era is highly subjected to the study of criticisms like “literary Nationalism” and tracing “intellectual trade routes” through reading the experience of Native Nonfiction as discussed by some of the pioneers like Craig Womack and Robert Warrior. But this paper concentrates on the application of postcolonial theory in Native American literature. Though the theory of postcolonialism is often condemned for implying in Native studies, still adopting a part of this theory- the Subversive mimicry- to prove the richness of Alexie's text Reservation Blues (1995) adds richness to his text.

The critics have recurrently questioned the usage of Postcolonial theory to study Indigenous discourses claiming this kind of approach to be another form of western theory. Writers like Lee Maracle strongly objects the usage of postcolonial theory for the reason that ‘they are still a classical colony’ (Riemenschneider 165). Thomas King in “Godzilla Vs PostColonial” labels postcolonial theory as “non-centered, non-nationalistic” theory that cannot voice out the oppressed” (1). However, there are some other writers like Kimberley Blaeser and Julia Emberley who approve the intersection of postcolonial theory in Native writing but rejects the complete postcolonial reading of a text. This paper does not use the strategy of postcolonial reading for a Native text but rather an intersection of postcolonial concept is used. Mudrooroo and Griffith's positive note on the relationship between indigenous literatures and postcolonial theory are explicit in the following lines,

While reading indigenous texts along postcolonial paradigms is mostly repudiated by Native writers, the careful and contextual application of postcolonial theory to hegemonic texts representing

indigenous people, colonial discourse analysis, seems to be more promising. (Riemenschneider167)

So, the application of postcolonial theory with selected tools adds more perspective to the text. One cannot strongly object that an individual can totally remain untouched by the mainstream. The influence of popular culture is natural but to make use of the mainstream to subvert and bring the crisis of marginalized to the limelight becomes the major task of Subversive mimicry.

Native American authors are widely known for using the Subversive mimicry technique to resist. Early before this Subversive mimicry, subversion was the first technique that thronged the Native American literature. However, surpassing the subversion technique, Subversive mimicry has gained importance empowering Resistance. Resistance is the vital element of all the marginalized literature but the difference is widely found in the way they resist the colonizers. The difference begins with the distinctive quality of authors to resist.

Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues, at various levels exhibit the technique of Subversive mimicry. Sherman Alexie has scrutinized the worse impact of colonization and the present state of Indians using this Subversive mimicry i.e. through subverting and mimicking of the literature, history and religion of the colonizer. Sherman Alexie is widely read for resisting through subversion. He is often praised for subverting the image created by non-Natives and breaking the image of stereotyped Indians.

However, more than merely subverting the already created images the art of subversion through mimicry goes unnoticed in his text. As Sherman Alexie feels, the mere implying of subversion will look more political than literary. He actually opposes the opinion to merely resist and his opinion becomes evident in the following lines,

They ask me to represent them, until the point where I'm not an artist. I'm a politician, or not even that, a propagandist. I'm supposed to be making public-service announcements, rather than creating art. (Lundquist 161)

So, his motif is not to simply oppose the colonizer throughout the text. It has to be more polished and at the same time it should hold the readers to read the complete text. His writing therefore effectively uses the techniques like Subversive mimicry to resist in a more polished way.

Alexie's major element that holds the attention of the readers in this text Reservation Blues is the introduction of Robert Johnson (name of a Blues Singer). Alexie apart from using the Black's vital element 'Blues' also offers a significant role for Robert Johnson and his guitar that brings a change in the life of some other Indians in the Reservation. Alexie begins the usage of Subversive mimicry through this character Robert Johnson.

A statement uttered by Johnson echoes Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. This play by Marlowe presents the story of a scholar and magician Faustus who pledges his soul to the devil desiring for magical powers. Echoing this mode of situation Johnson says, "Mr. Builds-the-fire, I sold my soul to the Gentleman So I could play this damn guitar better than anybody ever played guitar. I'm hopin' Big Mom can get it back" (8). Here Robert Johnson becomes Marlowe while guitar assumes the position of Satan. In the hope of attaining peace through music, Johnson has pledged his soul to guitar. But his hands play only the sad note of Reservation through Blues. As his guitar renders Blues

only at the expense of pledged soul, the livelihood of Natives in Reservation is always a sad note.

Blues, when introduced by African Americans served as their weapon to resist the colonizer but in due course of time around the late twentieth century it attained a different position. It got seeped through the mainstream and became a part of popular culture. At the time of Native American Renaissance, Blues are more or less the breath of mainstream Europeans. So, the usage of Blues to represent the life of Indians in a way can be considered as Subversive mimicry. His usage of Blues in a way mimics them and at the same time helps in an effective way to reach the variety of readers belonging to different parts of the world.

The combination of Blues is evident throughout the text with every chapter beginning with Blues entitled like-“Reservation Blues”, “Treaties”, “Indian Boy Love Song”, “Farther and Farther”, “My God has Dark Skin”, “Falling Down and Falling Apart”, “Big Mom”, “Urban Indian Blues”, “Small World and Wake.” Through these songs the lamentation of Spokane are brought out and at the same time the theme of the chapter is provided by Alexie. Thereby Blues also serve as a prologue to every chapter.

The mimicry of Blues has got thoroughly blended with Indians where Blues is considered as the ancient, aboriginal and indigenous. The mimicking of Blues and its perfect blending with Native literature no wonder results in Literary Hybridity. When Big mom’s music is stopped narrator explains “Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous” (Lundquist 160).

Focusing on the aspect of ‘Superman’, the ideology of an Indian man trying to be a super human being in midst of poverty is brought out by Alexie through subverting the image of Superman created by the Whites. As everyone knew, Superman is a fictional character created by American writer Jerry Seigel and Joe shuster. He can perform a giant task within a fraction of seconds, widely known as American cultural icon who will save the distressed from the plight. It is this character that is mimicked by Alexie to show the fact that an Indian is more troubled for himself and therefore he is not a real warrior but a pseudo-warrior.

He chooses the label Superman and reintroduces as Super Indian Man. He mimics the great efficiency of Superman only to subvert and point out the inefficiency of Super Indian Man. He calls them as pseudo-warriors since they are heroes only for themselves who spend their whole life to fight against the poverty. Checkers could see such desperation of warrior in the eyes of Thomas. She hates to see but it is an undeniable truth in the reservation.

To put across in the words of Alexie, “I’m Super Indian Man, those pseudo-warriors always shouted on the reservation. Able to leap tall HUD houses in a single bound. Faster than a BIA pickup. Stronger than a block of commodity cheese” (114). So, Alexie simply uses the Super Man image only to distort the real face of Indians to the colonizers.

One another efficient Subversive mimicry made by Alexie was the Subversive mimicry of Ten Commandments. Basically the Ten Commandments in the Biblical

narratives describe the mode of relation which a man should have with the God and his fellow human beings. The Ten Commandments are as follow:

1. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me..."
2. "Do not make an image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above..."
3. "Do not swear falsely by the name of the LORD..."
4. "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy"
5. "Honor your father and your mother..."
6. "Do not murder"
7. "Do not commit adultery."
8. "Do not steal."
9. "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor"
10. "Do not covet your neighbor's wife".

Sherman Alexie mimics these Ten Commandments that form the basis of Christianity as given by Moses in Hebrew Bible. These Ten Commandments which are considered as a moral foundation is subverted by Alexie to bring out the rules that are laid by the colonizers for the Reservation Indians to follow. He remodifies the Ten Commandments and states all these ten codes as follows:

The Reservation's Ten Commandments as given by the United States of America to the Spokane Indians:

1. You shall have no other forms of government before me.
2. You shall not make yourself an independent and self-sufficient government, for I am a jealous bureaucracy and will punish the Indian children for the sins of their fathers to the seventh generation of those who hate me.
3. You shall not misuse my name or my symbols, for I will impale you on my flag pole.
4. Remember the first of each month by keeping it holy. The rest of the month you shall go hungry, but the first day of each month is tribute to me, and you shall receive welfare checks and commodity food in exchange for your continued dependance.

5. Honour your Indian father and Indian mother because I have stripped them of their land, language, and hearts, and they need your compassion, which is a commodity I do not supply.
6. You shall not murder, but I will bring FBI and CIA agents to your reservations and into your homes, and the most intelligent, vocal, and angriest members of your tribes will vanish quietly.
7. You shall not commit adultery, but I will impregnate your women with illegitimate dreams.
8. You shall not steal back what I have already stolen from you.
9. You shall not give false testimony against any white men, but they will tell lies about you, and I will believe them and convict you.
10. You shall not convict the white man's house. You shall not covet the white man's wife, or his hopes and opportunities, his cars or VCRs, or anything that belongs to the white man.

These Ten Commandments imitating the original version also provides a source of information on the worst state of Indians. It exhibits the skillful usage of Subversive mimicry by Alexie. In general it is called as the hybrid version of the Ten Commandments but it is more of a Subversive mimicry that leads to hybridity. All these Ten Commandments hit the nail on the head by bringing the pathetic condition of Indians to the attention of the readers. Using the colonizer's religious commandments to expose the injustice met to the marginalised serves as the best instance for the subversive technique.

Alexie once again quotes the incident of discovery of America and reduces it to a trivial level to denote the disadvantage of the discovery of America for the marginalized. Thomas and Chess searches for their friend Victor and Junior for a whole night and the next early morning when they come back to hotel they find their friends sleeping in lobby. And Sherman Alexie states "Just before sunrise, Thomas and Chess walked into the lobby of their hotel and discovered America. No. They actually discovered Victor and Junior sleeping on couches in the lobby. No. They actually discovered Victor passed out on a couch while Junior read USA Today" (242).

Alexie, apart from applying the Subversive mimicry in religion and history also imparts this technique to literature. He mimics the voice of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth from the play *Macbeth*. It is one of the famous tragedies of Shakespeare which exhibits a strong motif of the truth that it is very difficult to get rid of one's sin especially in case of Macbeth who stands for the murder and blood stains. In this text Reservation Blues, Wright the official of Calvary record company looks down on his hands which have blood stains.

The name Wright symbolizes the name of General Wright who was once responsible for killing thousands of horses and Indians. So, this incident from history is connected with the incident from literature. Here Wright looks down on his hands and worries about the blood stains, "Wright looked at Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stain there" (244). Though this man from the audio company is not directly responsible for this crude murder still he could vision and stand as a testimony for the sin of his ancestors.

Originally in the play Macbeth, for the lust of power, Macbeth kills King Duncan. Immediately he feels his sin and tells that even a mighty ocean cannot wash the blood stains from his hands. Lady Macbeth initially scorns him but later herself finds difficult to wash the blood stains from her hand. Literally it is not the blood stains but the psychological fear is exhibited, where one becomes highly conscious of his/her sins. When she tries to get rid of the stain by washing hands, she gets disturbed. Her frustration is obvious in the lines “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” and to quote Shakespeare:

Doctor:

What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman:

It is an accustom'd action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

LadyMacbeth:

Yet here's a spot.

Doctor:

Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

LadyMacbeth:

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him. (Macbeth Act 5, scene 1, 26–40)

As stated earlier, Sherman Alexie never fails to bring the element of religion in the sphere of Subversive mimicry. He repeatedly quotes the miracle of Jesus Christ and the norms of religion to show that how the real condition of an Indian is in plight. His distress is brought out in the lines with reference to religion in the following lines:

He was such a good basketball player that all the Spokanes wanted him to be more. When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribes start expecting Jesus. Sometimes they'll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardine into a river of salmon. (97)

The grace of Christ is known to the world through his offering of wine to the poor by converting water and also his granting of food to the poor by multiplying one piece of fish into numerous for appeasing the hunger of thousands who gathered to listen to his preaching. The image of Christ is used by Sherman Alexie to show how every Indian expects any of his outstanding Indian to do miracles like him. Any Indian who exhibits the slightest hint of talent is adored more and as they admire and worship Jesus they do expect that one Indian should perform mighty task. But nevertheless it is not easy for an Indian to outgrow the problems and establish himself in the society. If he does so, then it is really a miracle as his fellow Indians consider.

One of the most significant usages of Subversive mimicry from history is the character of Wright and Sheridan. Alexie has mimicked their name for two major purposes – To revisualize the history and once again to exhibit the doom of Coyote Band which is brought by these two people of recording company. The history part is introduced to the readers through the dreams of Junior while the destruction of band and threaten of Sheridan against the band reechoes the history. Both Sheridan and Wright work in a recording company but their conversation peels their character and gives a hint to the disaster of the Coyote band,

“You’ve always been a good soldier,” Wright said to Sheridan.

“You’ve been a fine goddamn officer yourself,” Sheridan replied. (193)

Wright traveling with a white woman in car to a cemetery marking the burial of General George Wright and his wife captures the same old scene of massacre and the guilty conscience. Wright goes and lies on the top of the cemetery which has been marked as,

Gen. George Wright, U.S.A.

And his wife

Died

July 30, 1865

Lovely and pleasant in their lives,

And in their death they

Were not divided. (270)

Alexie presents an imagined conversation between Wright and his wife Margaret Wright who grieves for giving orders to kill the horses;

“I was the one,” Wright said to his wife. “I was the one. I was the one who killed them all. I gave the orders.”

The horses screamed in his head.

...

Wright closed his eyes and saw the colt standing still in that field. He remembered that he had taken a pistol from a private.

...

“Oh, God,” “I’m a killer. I’m a Killer.” (271)

According to history, in 1858 Colonel George Wright’s soldiers slaughtered more than 900 horses to reduce the power of Spokane Indians. Wright recurrently is portrayed as the one who worries about these sins but on the other hand Sheridan continues to remain as a sinner. He simply wants to use Coyote Springs to improve their materials nevertheless least cares for its destruction. They are exposed to rock world only to get damaged. He tortures Checker when she stays alone in the hotel. She tortures her and admires her physical beauty. He feels sorry for their destruction and loves to see them getting destructed. His arguments with Checker defending Calvary Company draw the support for colonizers. The name Calvary signifies the part of army troupe and adding to it in the pretext of talking about the failure of band, Sheridan says,

You had a choice... We gave you every chance. All you had to do was move to the reservation. We would’ve protected you. The U. S. Army was the best friend the Indians ever had.

What are you talking about? Checkers asked. We’re not in the army. We’re a rock band. (236)

The complete conversation of Sheridan involves the accusation of Indians for their fighting nature and refusal to adopt them for the new environment. He is the winner and it's a war where one has to win and the other has to meet the failure. Sheridan once again pictures the killing of Indian woman. He could not withstand the fact that he was pulled down from the horse by an Indian woman. In the description of the killing he recollects that how the child torn out of the womb bit his hands. All these narration is not the incident from the present day context but mimicking the voice of a General who has killed many Indians to subjugate them.

He expresses the frustration of colonizers who could never turn the Indians to White.

You know exactly what I'm talking about. You Indians always knew how to play dumb. But you were never dumb. You talked like Tonto, but you had brains like fucking Einstein. Had us Whites all figured out. But we still kept trying to change you. Tried to make you white. It never worked.
(237)

Through the above lines Alexie makes a keen mark over the colonizer's tone of frustration about Indians. To sum up though there are literatures that resist the oppression openly, still there are literatures that carry an undercover resistance. This undercurrent resistance at times goes unnoticed and the more captivating aspects in this literature are the mimicking of the colonizer to subvert their concepts and institutions against themselves. The author's usage of Subversive mimicry to oppose the colonizer in writing becomes the unique feature of his work. Thus, analyzing the text provides a plentiful resource on the usage of Subversive mimicry by Alexie to expose the reality by using the elements of the colonizer.

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