

A Critical Study of Poverty and Exploitation in Sherman Alexie's True Diary

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Abstract – Alexie superbly narrates and portrays daily life of Native Americans which is reflected and filled with poverty and exploitation. His characters were exploited by the white for a long time. They were debarred from their land. Their law and unstable income add to their pitiable plights. They finally lose their last hope to recover from their miserable condition. Alexie painted Reservation a horrid place haunted by horrid history. As I have shown already in the former chapters that the protagonists don't want to live on Reservation. They wanted to go in the White school and wanted to settle in Seattle. Far from being a stimulating environment, the Reservation community keeps its members from succeeding and achieving their dreams. The rare individuals who persevere are rejected and their endeavor makes them outcasts. Trying hard and having talent are virtues that are regarded as flaws by the majority of the Reservation people. Reservation appears in the works of Alexie, as a place where poverty, unemployment, alcoholism suffering and violence are common among Americans Indians. The feeling of poverty is pervasive in Natives that are set on Reservation. Aothor's Reservation characters live in poorly built HUD houses and surplus commodity food on the daily basis. Many of Alexie's characters are hopeless and despair. Very often the atmosphere of novels and short stories is bleak and future of the characters seems to be deteriorated.

Keywords – Diary, Poverty, Exploitation, Arnold Spirit, Spokane Community, White School, Seattle, Reservation.

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According to the eminent writer and critic of English literature Samuel Johnson poverty is that 'resolve not to be poor: whatever you have, spent less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult.' Poverty and happiness are contrary to each other, they cannot live together.

The definition of poverty from the business dictionary, it seems more realistic "Condition where people's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are not being met. Poverty is generally of two types: (1) Absolute poverty is synonymous with destitution and occurs when people cannot obtain adequate resources (measured in terms of calories or nutrition) to support a minimum level of physical health. Absolute poverty means about the same everywhere, and can be eradicated as demonstrated by some countries. (2) Relative poverty occurs when people do not enjoy a certain minimum level of living standards as determined by a government (and enjoyed by the bulk of the population) that vary from country to country, sometimes within the same country."¹

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the protagonist makes a bitterly humorous comment and complains about the fact that his family has always been poor, tracing its origins in terms of poverty. He states that "his parents came from a poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people."² This Novel is autobiographical, about an Indian boy Arnold Spirit called 'Junior' who lives with his parents on the Spokane Reservation. Protagonist represents Alexie himself, or at least, reminds him in many ways. Arnold was also born with same hydrocephalus on his brain, a handicap, which he survives. Similarly to Alexie, Arnold suffers from severe seizures and bedwetting during his childhood. His appearance differs from normal as Arnold has an enlarged skull, wears glasses with thick and stutters. Due to these impairments, the main protagonist gets ostracized by other children. He finds comfort in drawing cartoons and wander bouts with his friend, Rowdy.

Arnold decides to flee from the poor condition of the Spokane Reservation; his burning ambition is not met with much sympathy on the Reservation. When Arnold transfer to Reardan, an all-white school, the situation does not improve. He is constantly bullied and mocked in the all-white

environment. Gradually, Arnold's toughness earns other schoolmates' respect. However, back on the Reservation, he is considered traitor because he left the Reservation and became successful. Particularly on the ending scenes, where Arnold plays the basketball game against the Reservation school, is highly emotional. The moment Reardan team wins, Arnold feels very happy. However, he starts to feel guilty after he realizes what such defeat means to the tribe, "Okay, so maybe my white teammates had problems, serious problems, But none of their problems was life threatening. But I looked over at the Wellpinit Redskins, at Rowdy. I knew that two or three of those Indians might not have eaten breakfast that morning" (True Diary, 195).

Deplorable condition of life on a Reservation resulting in the desire to flee away is some of the main concern in True Diary. As Nygren points out, Alexie's portrayal of Reservation has changed in his work. The author maintains that his early work has characteristics for viewing Reservation as "a geographical space of borders and confinements. On the other side, in his more recent fiction, the Reservation change its ontology and becomes a mental and emotional territory."³

Alexie himself admits that Reservation borders play a vital role in Indians' lives. As he points out, although Indians become successful off the Reservation, they still carry the Reservation stigma has an, personal decisions undeniable impression on ethnicity, personal decision and a life full of love and affection. The book has received many positive responses not only from critics, but also from wide range of readers.

"Well, let me tell you. Agnes Adams is my mother. My mother! And Adams is her maiden name. So that means my mother was born an Adams and she was still an Adams when she wrote her name in that book. And she was thirsty when she gave birth to me. Yep, so that means I was starting a geometry book that was at least thirsty years older than I was. I could not 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." (True Diary, 31).

The fact that young Native Americans in the Reservation school study from the outdated material their parents studied before them extensively startles. Arnold and he throw the book at his White teacher Mr. P after Arnold's suspension from school; Mr. P visits Arnold in order to convince him about his abilities. In fact, he reveals Arnold's high potential for studies

"who has the most hope?" I asked. Mom and dad looked at each other. They studied each other's eyes, you know, like they had antennas and were sending radio signals to each other. And then they both looked back at me. "Come on" I said, "who has

the most hope?" "White people", my parents said at the same time. That's exactly what I thought they were going to say, so I said the most surprising thing they'd ever heard from me. "I want to transfer schools," I said, going to Reardan is truly a strange idea. But it is not wired that my parents so quickly agreed with my plans. They want a better life for my sister and me... yeah, Dad is a drunk and Mom is an ex- drunk, but they don't want their kids to be drunks." (True, 45-46).

"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. And let me tell you, that old, old, old, decrepit geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. What do you do when the world has declared nuclear war on you?" (True Diary, 31).

Even though Arnold's family has problems, his Dad is always encouraging. He is even a little optimistic, pushing his son to dream big, "your mother was thirteen and I was five when we first met. And guess how we first met? How? She helped me get a drink from a water fountain. Well, that just seems sort of gross," I said I was tiny, Dad said. And she boosted me up so I could get a drink. And Imagine, all these years later and we're married and have two kids.

By presenting the violence of oppression space back to the society that created it, the novels become an abject of social protest. By examining and writing about real world violence, through the evocation of terrorists. Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* aims to subvert the paradigm of silence. John Smith, an American Indian adopted by a White family. John struggles to form his own identity in the face of rampant misrepresentation of Native society. This tension also divides him from his white parents and leave him feeling even more alone, which further signifies the displacement of the marginalized figures. In this novel Alexie shows the damaging legacy of historical and academic representations of Indians as savages and other negative characterizations. He also uses the public response to serial killing that only name the murderer the *Indian Killer*, but, in so doing, create a wide spread panic of violent attacks against Native people. Alexie's narrative complicates the term *Indian Killer* through double meaning. While the surface meaning refers to a serial killer who murders and then scalps his victims, the White misrepresentation and representation of Native culture, in essence, also kills the Indian.

Alexie crafts a novel that represents fictional violence as a tool of protest to real oppression in an attempt to create new space. Indian killer's exile will never find or produce a space within which to return. The novel ends with the main character John Smith, jumping from the last skyscraper being

constructed in Seattle to the dark urban streets below. Either on or off the Reservation, he finds no spaces to occupy. He has no place to relocate his identity for self-definition. Rather than present manifesto promotion violence against White society, Alexie's novel connects, as Marie's statement suggests, the power of the thought with the power of protest. The actions of the characters and the aggressive racist propaganda response serve as examples to argue the point that violence for any reason never solve a problem. Fictional violence connect to an unknown serial killer to gain attention for the problems, Alexie suggests that often the most important point is not finding the right answer, but asking the questions. In response to the White novelist, Wilson, who asks whether or not a real Indian would commit the brutal murder, Reggie says,

"I think an Indian could do something like that. Maybe the question should be something different. Maybe you should be wondering which Indian would not do it. Lots of real Indian men out there have plenty enough reasons to kill a white man. Three at this table right now."⁴

From the beginning of the novel, we think that Smith is the '*Indian Killer*', due to his peculiar behavior and inner driving force. However, the real murderer is not explicitly revealed in any part of the novel, in fact, there are more characters that detest whites and could be, therefore, regarded the murderers. As Grassian says, "Alexie's intention is to show how Indians commonly experience violent rage and anger due to marginalization, discrimination, and unequal power struggle"⁵ it consequences in poverty.

Although the conditions on Reservations are many cases highly disturbing, life on a Reservation also has a few positive impacts on the Native American culture. The supporters of Reservation often see these areas as the cultural base, where native language are Spokane and passed on. Moreover, Reservations promote family and community bonds, as part of long standing traditions. Despite these positive aspects of a Reservation life, many Indians and non-Indians who are familiar with the present day conditions on the Reservations are dissatisfied with them. This dissatisfaction and desire to improve the well-being of Indian still residing on the tribal land has to two major efforts.

One type of program enables particularly young individual to leave the Reservation and seek better opportunities elsewhere. Another major effort to improve tribal life; focus on the development and support of economies of reservations. Reservation economies have stagnated owing to the poor policy responsible for the centre and industrial hubs at the beginning of the 19th century. Today, the most thriving economies result from the discovery of natural resources, such as oil and timber. Other Reservation takes advantage of their proximity to major tourist attraction, for instance casinos and ski

resorts. Nevertheless, it is necessary and that many of them are still desperate for economic development.

It is true that some of Alexie's stories and novels, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Reservation Blues*, *The Lone Ranger* are partly autobiographical. Alexie himself admits it. When he speaks about his life in interviews, the listeners who have read his books that Alexie undoubtedly drew inspiration from his own experience. In addition, many of his stories take place on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he grew up. Nevertheless, they are not Alexie's autobiographies.

The current status of urban Native American is mixed. Many people still keep the image of Indian as 'noble savage' with multi- feathered headdress and a bow and arrow. But Indians are becoming the integral to the modern America as any other minority. It may causes a shock for some to realize that instead of regularly attending powwows and wearing moccasins, Native American listen to hip-hop music, wear Nike sneakers and behave pretty much the same way as any member of popular culture. However, family bonds and Indian community is crucial to many Native American, and so organizations that help urban Native Americans preserve their cultural heritage are very important. Generally, Native American literature portrays daily life of Native Americans filled with hardship. Many Native American write about the traditions and their lifestyle.

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