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| Article: | Literature as a Vehicle of Peaceful Counter-discourse: An Analysis of Native American Writings |
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Abstract

This article seeks to analyze key Native American literary works with a view to discussing the thematic concerns of this generally ignored tradition of literature. Using Alan McKee's model of textual analysis, we discuss that Native American literature serves as a peaceful means of producing and disseminating counter-discourse. The conquest—genocide for some—of the Native Americans is presented in all its horrific details but in a manner that engages and educates the reader. The writers that the study chose through purposive sampling, Alexie, Momaday, Silko, and Robe, discuss not just the history of the abuse but also what it has led to and the forms it occurs in, in the present day. The article is significant in that it discusses literature and a people systematically ignored by the mainstream and also in that it asserts that literature needs to be discussed as a player in the field of peace and communication.

Key Words: Alexie, Mormon, Counter-discourse, Native American

Introduction

“Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation.” (Alexie, 1993)

The present article is the outcome of a desire to delve into the Native American literature with a twofold purpose of brining out its major themes and to show that literature can be a powerful means of communicating a sense of betrayal, loss, and insidious exploitation. We have structured this article in a way that devotes as much space as possible to the issues that the Native American writers discuss in their works so that we may contribute to giving them voice.

Sherman Alexie in *One Stick Song* (2000) says that he is at the end of the game where he has just one stick to lose but he hopes to use this single stick to win back “all the other sticks”. He wants to celebrate the time when all his sticks are returned to him. We believe that the Indian literature is the Indians’ last stick with which they can attempt to win their rightful status in the world, to represent their true history, to give the future generations something to be proud of, to tell the world of the oppressions they have been subjected to, to right the wrongs of the past, and to reveal the untruths created about them by the euro-American Right. *The Powwow at the End of the World* (Alexie, 1996) points to the significance of literary representation of the atrocities the Indians have suffered over the decades and centuries and the value of such literary discourses in resisting the dominant ideology. Alexie says he will forgive the white man once the wrongs of the past have been righted, once the Grand Coulee Dam ceases to barrier the salmon’s path to their spawning grounds. Alexie’s intention is clear: to use literature to raise voice for the Indians against the wrongs committed against them.

Purpose Statement

This paper intends to analyze Indian literature, with specific reference to Sherman Alexie, to discuss the thematic concerns of the Indian writers and the stylistic measures they adopt to present their narrative.

Questions

- What key aspects of the Indian existence does Sherman Alexie discuss in his writings?
- What major atrocities against the Indians does Alexie point out in his writings?

Method

Indian literature has come a long way from orature to adopt the mainstream genres and now consists of works in novel, short story, poetry, drama, and film. Though it is still some way from being mainstream there is a significant body of work that a single study cannot cover, therefore, we have chosen to delimit the Indian literature to Sherman Alexie, an Indian writer born of a Spokane mother and Coeur d’Alene father and a prominent writer and film maker. In a way he was the obvious choice for the study because of his status as a writer—he was declared by *The New Yorker* as one of the best American writers under 40—and the critical acclaim and attention he has received from Grassian (2005), Berglund and Roush (2010), Lewis (2011) among others and the large following he has.

As the study aims to address the thematic concerns of the Indian literature and the key issues of marginalization it aims to address textual analysis, as per McKee’s (2003) conceptualization of it was chosen as the method of study. Textual analysis allows researchers to make interpretations based on their sense-making practices and allows for understanding texts and their themes.

Literature Review

The existing literature is mainly interested in “pain of living” (Dean, 2020) that the Native American writers tend to explore, with some looking at historical narratives, historical revision (Akhtar, 2021, Fight, 2019, Russo, 2017) and some in the treatment meted to the Native Americans (Shook, 2020, and McCall, 2020), and also the ecological connections the Native American writers explore (Monani, 2017, Stewart, 2018). The paucity of the works show that there is a significant gap that needs to be filled when it comes to discussing Native American literature.

Analysis and Discussion

One of the most important issues for the Native Americans is the issue of identity. They were the original inhabitants of the land. Not only were they uprooted, displaced, oppressed and killed an identity of choice was imposed on them. Starting from Red Skins and Red Indians we have come to the seemingly politically correct Native American. Native American signifies that the land was always America. This is clever on part of the white man because using the term like this gives him the ownership of the land. But the truth is that America was not always there. America was the identity given to the land by the European invaders. Sherman Alexie takes issue with the term in *The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me*. He says: “I have never met a Native American. Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians.” (Alexie, 2000). Alexie feels that the Indians must not be swayed by any superficial attempt at political correctness. They are Indians and they should be proud to own the label. They have lost their lands, their languages, their people, their customs and their rituals to the onslaught of the white man and now they should hold onto the smallest things left with [them] with all the strength”. We feel the undercurrents visible in the issue of identity exist throughout the Indian literature and these are the undercurrents of asserting themselves, presenting their identity and most important wresting their narrative from the white man.

Alexie notes that hundreds of books are written about Indian every year “so few” (2000) are by Indians. The books by non-Indian writers—who may also use Indian names “such as Eagle Woman and Pretty Shield” in an attempt to appear genuine—writing about the Indians sell the most because the people are used to coming to know about the Indians from their oppressors. They are comfortable with this voice because it vindicates their taught ideology of Indians being savages and uncouth bands of people living on the periphery of civilization. The Indians who choose to write face problems in getting their works published and even when they do manage it the reception of the work is dependent on which tribe is more in with the critics with the results that the Sioux authors sell more than any other.

Mixed-blood writers or non-Indian writers sell books. They may even come up with best sellers but they are only impostors. Mixed-blood writers write about tribes they are not part of and do not even realize that they cannot know a tribe’s peculiar rituals, customs, society if they are not part of one. Alexie himself writes about the Spokane, Tapahonso writes about the Dine, Erdrich writes about the Chippewa. A writer can write about only their own tribe for the tribe is in fact a nation and there is such a wealth of information to be pruned before some of it is penned down. But of course a mixed-blood writer is not connected to the tribe enough to be able to understand its distinct life and rhythms. Alexie mentions such corrupt writers in “Open Books; (Alexie, 2000) where a poet writes about “love and the canyon and the sunset, and how this strengthened their bond when he could not even get close to the actual canyon. The poet’s son reveals the secret:

I remember
my mother and I sat in the car
and watched my father pace back

and forth outside the ranger's station
 at the canyon. Hell, we never
 even got close to the actual
 canyon

According to Alexie only the Indian writers have the right to write about the Indians. This is perhaps because the Indians have been misrepresented by so many and on so many occasions. After the very first encounter with the white man Columbus they were misrepresented to the people back at Europe as savages and as subjects. Columbus judged them by his European standards and dismissed them as a primitive group of people that could and should well be turned into slaves. Even Indian writers used their peoples as a means of earning money and reinforced the Euro-American stereotypes about the Indians. This is why Alexie feels that the Indian narrative should be told by the Indians who are truly Indians who feel the pain of their nation and other such nations in their bones and who have the memory of genocide apartheid and massacres running in their veins. Retelling the atrocities they suffered is no ordinary thing and the person retelling should be no ordinary Indian. The literary merit is not a criterion for Alexie, it is the *Indianness* that is paramount because the Indian story needs to be told truly not artistically.

Even in the cases where the Indians have managed to get an American education and have entered the mainstream American society the discrimination against them has not stopped. Alexie says when he is in a room he goes unnoticed because the white people just choose to ignore him. To them he does not exist. For them the Indians are just savages mentioned in the books and shown dancing on National Geographic and The History Channel. They cannot fathom an Indian living like them. The proverbial glass ceiling is now a glass wall which segregates the Indians from the white society.

The Indians have suffered an unimaginable atrocity in that their religion and their religious rituals were taken away and replaced with Christianity. The Indians had their religious beliefs mocked and ridiculed and the new generations were exposed to Christianity and Christian virtues and made to renege of their Indian beliefs. Alexie appropriates the Euro-American narrative regarding the Indian beliefs—which are dismissed as myths—and questions the Christian beliefs and traditions. This is his attempt to show that the Indian beliefs are only as unbelievable as the Christian ones and vice versa. In *Crow Testament* and *Theology of Cockroaches* he defies the conventional reverence for Christianity and the Christian notion of prophets and God and questions if the cockroach is not God. After all nobody has seen God so Alexie opines how can one say that it is not so.

In *How to Rise* (2009) Alexie is more open in his questioning of the Christian beliefs. He says that the Christians believe in taking bread to commemorate Christ but another perspective maybe that “[t]he bread is simply bread” and any other connotation attached to it is just as unreal as the Indian beliefs are presented to be. The salmon is sacred for the Spokane but the white man dismiss it as a savage's superstition and false belief and through their narrative create an impression for the rest of the world about the Indians being primitive idolaters but they do not realize that their own beliefs are as hard to believe as the Indians'. Alexie wants the Euro-Americans to treat the salmon with the same respect as they do their bread and wine at Eucharist.

Alexie continues in his strain of challenging Christianity in *The Sasquatch Poems* he says he believes “in Sasquatch / just as much as [he believes] in God / which is not logical / since more people have seen Sasquatch / than have seen God.” (Alexie, 1996). This is not a diatribe against Christianity it is only an attempt to present the Indian narrative on things. The white man's narrative is so strong and so persuasive that the world has come to look at the Indians' beliefs as

mere myth but Alexie attempts to show that all religious beliefs are similar: they demand faith and cannot hold up to logical scrutiny hence all such beliefs must be respected. The white man does not want “Sasquatch to exist / because her existence would destroy their God” (Alexie, 1996). The Euro-Americans are aware of the feeble footing of their beliefs so they try to undermine the beliefs of the Indians so that their own beliefs are not questioned. This is a parallel to the white man’s history. They try to present their history as a glorious affair so that nobody casts doubt on their reckless massacres of the Indians, among others.

The Indian authors and poets also present their beliefs in their words to lead people towards an understanding of their culture and religious beliefs. Alexie tells the importance of stories in the Indian culture in *The Summer of Black Widows* (Alexie, 1996). He says the spiders created stories in their stomachs and just as the webs of spiders are everywhere the Indian stories are present in all walks of their lives: “Stories in our cereal boxes / Stories in our firewood / Stories in the pockets of our coats...A dozen stories per acre.” Later in the same work he presents the Indian belief regarding what is known as big foot in the white world. All this is an attempt to present the Indian view to the readers, a view heretofore hidden from them.

The Indian authors present their culture to acquaint the readers with the treasure trove the Indian culture is and also to demystify the Euro-American presentation of the Indians as savages without any cultural traditions. Alexie in *Glossary of a Powwow, Grand Entry, Drum as Love, Fear, and Prayer* and *Owl Dancing with Fred Astaire* (Alexie, 1996) presents the soft image of the Indian culture. He presents the importance of the drum as the musical instrument for sacred ceremonies. He presents glimpses of different types of dances on various events to make us take note of them not as mere stomping of feet of painted men and women but as rituals as significant to their culture as ours are for us.

While on the one hand the Indians’ pastures, eco-systems were destroyed and they were forcibly relocated to environments they had no skills to survive in on the other hand they were introduced to substances that were injurious to health and caused immense harm to the Indians. Wine was one such substance and the worst harm it caused was diabetes. The Indians have suffered from diabetes and its related ailments in huge numbers. One of the worst effects of diabetes is the loss of limbs. Such a person dies many times in day for the lack of ability and for the loss of limbs and consequently functions. The artificial limbs “come / in three different colors: white, black, and in-between” (Alexie, 2000) but no artificial limb can be a replacement of what was lost. The Indians hold the Euro-Americans responsible for their misery of seeing able-bodied men turn into wrecks with prosthetic legs or hooks for hands. The Euro-American do not talk about such issues of the Indians so the Indian literature does the job of presenting the Indians’ issues to show the world how cruel and callous the Euro-Americans have been and still are to the Indians.

In *Sugar Town* (Alexie, 2000) Alexie uses the parallel with Vincent Van Gogh to talk about the amputation of organs due to diabetes. Van Gogh severed a part of his ear and painted a self-portrait but for the Indians it is not an option. The van Gogh of diabetes has gone crazy on the Indians and is taking their body parts left, right, and center killing the Indians, as Alexie notes in *Diabetes*, “piece by piece”. The Indians can be jovial about the loss of limbs for instance Alexie’s father wants an eye patch so that with his severed leg and covered eye he can look like a pirate but there is no hiding the bitterness against the white man for introducing the hazard into their community.

The Euro-American narrative imprisons the Indians within stereotypes. Be it the Portland of *Green Grass Running Water* (King, 1993) who despite being an Indian had to don a rubber nose to fit the image of the Hollywood Indian or the Estelle Walks Above who is expected to be a wise

sage the Euro-American stereotype the Indians. Alexie aims to present a narrative that breaks the mold and shows the world that there is more to Indians than what the westerns show. Alexie picks on a popular Euro-American narrative the western novel and movies where the Indians exist to be the opposite of the heroic white cowboy. In a western the Indian is a savage who the white hero quells. The only role the Indians perform in the piece is of dying savages. In *How to Write the Great American Indian Novel* (Alexie, 1996) Alexie mocks the typical western where all the Indians “have tragic features”, where the Indian woman needs to be in love with a white man to become the hero of the piece, and where the Indians must be killed “all of the Indians will be ghosts”.

The Indians suffered at the hands of the Euro-Americans in that they were, to use their euphemism, relocated. This relocation was a deliberate ploy to annihilate the Indians by transplanting them into inhospitable climates or into environments for which they did not have the survival skills. The Indian tribes were moved from one place to another. The Trail of tears is one such example where tribes including the Cherokee, Choctaw and Seminole were forcibly evicted from their territory and marched to alien environments. More than 60,000 Indians were killed from just one tribe.

The present day world is impressed by the Euro-American emphasis on the environment and the preservation of eco-systems but the fact that the Euro-Americans used destruction of the environment in their war to wipe out the Indians. The construction of the Grand Coulee Dam on the Spokane river (Alexie, 1996) is one such example. The construction of the dam submerged many places sacred to the Indians and equally importantly it prevented the Spokane from fishing salmon which was a major part of their diet. The step was also evil because the dam did not allow the salmon to travel upriver to spawn with the result that the salmon population started dwindling. *Migration 1902* (Alexie, 2000) tells a similar story about the threat to the salmon and the Spokane. Mad Bear and Rolling Thunder refers to the destruction of the pinon forest to deprive the Indian tribes of a vital source of protein. Sadly the Euro-American narrative makes no mention of such excesses and hence the Indian writers are creating their narrative to work towards a situation where the Indian perspective is also heard.

Beside building dams on Indian territory, instead of other equally feasible place, the Euro-Americans mined Uranium on Indian territory. Such mining was more than utter disregard for the environment or the ecology of the area it was a blatant disregard for the lives of the Indians. Mining radioactive material on white territory would have met with claims of damages by the locals but in the case of the Indians the so-called treaties could be dug up and interpreted in specific ways to allow for mining. Few steps were taken to safeguard the lives the local tribes and when the mines went dry the companies upped and left without any attempt to retrieve the hazardous material on the site (Alexie, 1996).

The Indian narrative is partly propelled by the fear of extinction. They exist on the periphery of the American society and have barely survived attempts by the white man to wipe them from the surface of the earth. The fear of genocide is very real for the Indians who have been in danger for decades. Of course the white man’s narrative does not mention this. It only glorifies the so-called heroes of the battles against the Indians e.g. Colonel Custer (Alexie, 2007). The white man’s narrative is quiet about the massacre at Wounded Knee or the battle of the Long Horn and other such one sided wars. Alexie presents his apprehensions at the alarming rate at which the Indian population has decreased over the years. He notes that there are just two million Indians left on the land, not even enough to fill a metropolis. In *Soon to be a National Geographic Special* (2000) Alexie says “All of the Indian boys in the world / gathered into one red Toyota Celica”. He

is pointing towards the greatly reduced population and even this populace has the fear of death looming at large over it. Alexie like many other writers fears that a time may come when Indians will exist in just TV shows. The Indian narrative is pushed by the fear of extinction. The writers want to tell their side of the story to push back the onslaught on their culture and also to create a clear record of their existence.

Alexie in *Things (for an Indian) to do in New York (City)* comments on the American desire to kill as many Indians with as little effort as possible.

But, America, I think how
 your men will always find
 a more effective way to kill.
 No Indian would have ever invented
 an automatic bow and arrow
 (128-9)

A modern day threat to their survival came from the governments policy on what is a tribe. The US government started a vicious policy of revoking the status of Indians as tribe. Not being a tribe meant not being entitled to reservation land and this in turn allowed the government to swoop in and claim the land. The narrator in *Indian Radio Days* says: “The U.S. government has recently announced the termination of her tribe, saying they are no longer Indians under current federal law.” (Howe and Gordon, 1999) It sounds absurd that a government can declare someone as not belonging to a particular race but it is in fact another version of denying the Indians their identity. Just as Hollywood determines who is Indian enough in the officialdom the Indians’ identity is subservient to the government’s wishes. If the government so wills you are an Indian and if the government wishes to not see you as an Indian you cannot do anything. The government wanted Indian territory and used the excuse of the Indians no longer constituting a tribe to encroach on the Indian land. The Indian writers present this sad state of affairs while the white discourse is silent about the issue.

The Europeans and their descendants the Euro-Americans have been creative in the choice of their weapons for eliminating the Indians. When the attempts to obliterate the Indians physically did not prove as successful as they had hoped for they took another equally dastardly means to the end of annihilating the Indians. Killing the Indians was proving to be difficult so they started taking the Indian out of the Indians. This was the plan to educate the Indian children in the euro-American tradition of education. For the purpose children were grabbed from reservations and sent off to faraway boarding schools where they were drilled in the Euro-American view of things and it was planned that these children even if they lived would not be Indians.

The Indians’ present-day existence is a miserable one at best and the misery is compounded by the fact that it is partly due to other Indians. The Indian writers are not oblivious to the Indians’ crimes and excesses against other Indians. The present-day Indians suffer due to the white man. They suffer on the streets because nobody will hire them, they suffer because of the alcohol the white man made certain to get them hooked on to, they bleed because of the unhealthy lifestyle they were forced to adopt, they ache because of the boarding schools. As if all this was not enough the Indians, beset by afflictions have started inflicting harm on other Indians because they are powerless to do anything else. An Indian mother sells her child because she has no power to do anything else. She has no power to take the white man to task for his sins so she finds the easy way out of her problem and inflicts pain on her child. The Indians in the modern US are outcasts. They are not accepted into the mainstream society. Over the last many years there has not been even a single major Hollywood production about the Indians exhibiting the neglect of the Indians. In a

society that prides itself on patronizing arts Indian poets “shiver beneath the freeway / and [beg] for enough quarters to buy pencil and paper” (Alexie, 1996).

The modern Indians maybe US citizens but do not have the rights citizenship entails. For one thing the citizenship came too late. The Indian writers e.g. Howe and Gordon bring to light the discrimination against the Indians in that not only was their land usurped they were not recognized as legal residents of the country. It was only in 1924 that they were declared Americans. The Indians suffered at the hands of the creators of white discourse in that the issue that they were not recognized as citizens was not presented but also because even after being declared citizens they did not get any aid from the government and continued to languish in the squalor imposed upon them by centuries of oppression.

Estelle Walks Above (Alexie, 2004) is another aspect of the negative side of the modern day Indian existence where the Indians are after easy money and use their Indian identity towards financial gains. The whites also exploit traits associated with the Indians to make money. The Jane Fonda Indian workout diet says: “Get rid of that unwanted flesh, the Indian way. Call 1-800-INIDANS.” The Indian way sells and that is why the Indians and the whites use it for commercial purposes.

The modern Indian existence is also one where the Indians are taking things in their own hands. We would like to mention that the Indian writers are a success story of the modern Indian existence. they have presented their narrative with force, clarity, passion and art to shock the readers out of their disinterest to set them on a journey of awareness of their Indian countrymen. Challenging the dominant Euro-American narrative was not easy but they have done it with class and artistic skill finding new ways of asserting their identity, history and showcasing their struggle to survive brutal oppression over centuries.

The Euro-American discourse is biased in its representations of the wars with the Indians. It presents the whites as heroes but stops short of reporting the deaths of countless Indians in these wars. The Indians literature focuses on the Indian deaths and presents their version that these wars were not incited by the Indians and that the massacres were a result of the trigger-happiness of the white soldiers, a fact or at least a point of view ignored by the colonizers’ narrative. Alexie presents this view in *Flight* (2007) and it is presented in *Indian Radio Days* (Howe and Gordon, 1999) too. Eugenia expresses the maltreatment of her people: “...we’ve been unearthed, underrepresented, considered uncivilized, and still they are unconvinced that I have a reason to be fed up.”

Recommendations

Alexie’s themes are also there in the works of other Indian writers like Silko, Robe, Tapahonso, Geiogamah, Erdrich, Kneubuhl, Howe, King, etc. and future studies would do well to discuss these writers for their themes and also style. Scholarship in literature as well as communication stands to gain immensely from looking at how the Indian writers address issues of marginalization, continued suppression, and how to create counter historical wrongs without resorting to violence.

Conclusion

The Indian narrative is one of the best examples of counter discourse. It presents the Indian perspective on things to make the readers aware that there are perspectives other than the Euro-American one. Other than correcting the bias of history the Indian literature presents issues that are important to the Indians to bring these issues to the forefront. Perhaps the most important thing here is that the communication of the Indian story is achieved in a nonviolent manner through invoking literary genres.

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