

## Indigenous American Voices in the Poetry of Sherman Alexie

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Sherman Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington. Reservations were definite pieces of land where the Native American populations were confined to after the influx of white settlers. For a poet like Walt Whitman who depicts his poetic voice as the voice of America, Christopher Columbus was like a prophet who discovered “a golden world” and enabled the possibility of unifying the world. Whitman yearned for a world wherein his poetic soul could speak for whole of the humanity and particularly for America. This vision of a unified world appears to be very different in the writings of the Native American poet Sherman Alexie who belonged to a group that had lived on the very land for centuries. In his autobiographical novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, he describes his life growing up on the reservation and particularly his experiences in the white children’s school where he studied. In his poems Alexie is characteristically ironic even while being humorous. He describes the underlying aspects of life in reservations where a history of oppression is deliberately hidden but which manifests in the everyday life of individuals living there. “Crow Testament” and “Evolution” unveil the tragic reality of life in the reservations but his poetic voice also makes the oppressed the principal subject of engagement. As Ananya Dasgupta observes, “Unlike Whitman who saw the disparate parts of the globe connected in a spiritual passage that a poet could undertake, Alexie sees the world connected in the solidarity of the oppressed” (14).

Alexie’s poetic voice displays irreverence towards figures like Columbus who are representative of a canonical wisdom and a canonized literature which claims to be inclusive of all kinds of voices and experiences.

Alexie claims that the voice of his group remained underrepresented for a long time and his poetry initiates a dialogue with the canon and connects the history of the flourishing settlers to the history of oppression of the indigenous populations. His poetry not only explores the historical and sociological contexts of the indigenous groups but also the manifestations of this history years later.

One of the central poems of the collection titled *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, “Evolution” interlinks the theory of social Darwinism with the expansion of American capitalism and how the two have systematically suppressed the Native Americans. Darwin’s theory of evolution of the species was used to justify the elimination of certain races on grounds that some races were better at social adaptation while others were not. Such elimination was biologically justified and Alexie explores this aspect through the social and economic lens in the poem. The opening lines of the poem are as follows:

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation  
right across the border from the liquor store  
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week . . .

William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody was a soldier in the American Civil war and his presence is reminiscent of the conflict between the white settlers and the Native Americans. In the twenty- first century he refigures as a capitalist businessman who has opened a pawn shop and still benefits from exploiting the native population. Pawn shops were establishments where the natives could sell their belongings in exchange for money. In the poem, the pawn shop is open seven days a week reflecting a stringent capitalist ethos. They sell all their needful everyday items due to poverty like jewelry, television sets and clothes. And finally when left with nothing they ‘pawn their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin.’ But the irony in the poem is that after Buffalo Bill has extracted everything from the natives, he closes his pawn shop and renames it as ‘the museum of native American cultures.’ The lives of Native Americans become museum pieces and their memory is finally objectified and monetized. The central theme of the poem is how cultures are

commodified after brutal extraction of human value. Even though the natives are a live population they are contained in museums.

In “Crow Testament,” Alexie depicts the story of the forceful conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. The poem was part of a collection titled *One Stick Song*. The title of the poem alludes to the Old and New Testaments. When America was colonized, the white Puritan settlers also brought their own religion and religious thought. As a result, there was an intermingling of ideas from the mythologies of both the religions. The title of the poem is a play upon this synthesis and the subsequent tension between the two. Significantly, the major theme of the poem is the erasure of the past of the natives who were rendered ahistorical by the Europeans.

Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird  
And strikes down Abel.

The opening lines of the poem allude to the story of Cain and Abel as told in the Old Testament. The children of Adam and Eve, Cain murdered his brother Abel. This became the first recorded act of fratricide in the Christian belief system. Under the same belief system, the natives and the white settlers are seen as siblings and an explicit analogy is highlighted that just as Cain killed his brother Abel, the white settlers killed their fellow brothers. Here, the crow is used as a weapon to kill the natives. Alexie takes an important Christian myth and subverts it to portray the destruction wrecked upon the natives who had practiced their own beliefs for centuries.

Damn, says the Crow, I guess  
this is just the beginning.

The poem repeatedly uses the phrase ‘damn’ which gives it a form similar to that of Psalms of the Bible. But unlike the biblical psalms ‘damn’ here carries a disrespectful tone and sense. The poem also uses as its framework the various movements in time from the beginning to the end as per the Christian mythological belief system. Crucially, it also imagines time according to the Native mythology.

The white man,  
 disguised as a falcon, swoops in  
 and yet again steals a salmon  
 from Crow's talons.  
 Damn, says Crow, if I could swim  
 I would have fled these country years ago.

This paragraph alludes to the story of original land stealings. The falcon is a powerful bird who steals the salmon from the crow. The falcon in reality is the white man who controls physical strength, whereas the crow is an ordinary everyday bird without any significant resources to fight back. The poet explores a crucial part of the exploitative history of how land from the natives was forcefully stolen. And the tragedy lies in the fact that even when the crow has no resources to call its own, it has to remain there in subordination. The next part of the poem traces the story of the christianisation of the native populations.

The Crow God as depicted  
 in all of the reliable Crow bibles  
 looks exactly like a Crow.  
 Damn, says Crow, this makes it  
 so much easier to worship myself.

The paragraph is full of ironic references to Creation of man from the Bible. The Genesis narrates the story of God creating Adam in his own image. The poet overturns this story in order to establish that it is actually humans who create God in their own image so that it is easier for them to worship God and propagate religion as per their own advantage. Alexie also attacks the arrogance of Christianity and the consequent hubris of its followers that it is religion which governs them and their actions when in reality man has created the idea of religion in order to aid him in his own material advances.

Alexie also draws upon the battle of Jericho as described in The Book of Joshua. Joshua was the leader of the wandering tribe of Israelites who in the search of the Promised Land, burnt the city of Jericho and killed all its people. The idea behind tracing these biblical instances is

that Alexie wants to draw that killings and genocides of human populations in the name of religion has had a long history. Alexie also wants to enforce that people think they are killing other people when they are killing their own people. This battle for the Promised Land still figures in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. As Dasgupta and Katyal observe, “Alexie draws a large arc of genocide and conflict as he connects the Native American experience with that of the victims of the holocaust or the continuing conflict in Gaza” (46).

Alexie’s characteristic style infuses his awareness of tragic depth of a situation with the humour of his lyric. He provides a climactic moment to the situation with humour. The sacramental text of the Bible is subverted to expose the Native American realities because religion was one of the powerful weapons in the hands of white Europeans that they used to justify their subordination of the already existing native populations.

The systematic destruction of the native cultures is also an important theme of the poem. The powwow is a festival where Native Americans gather to honour their ancestors and celebrate their culture. The Crow that has been omnipresent in the poem brings the news of apocalypse during the festival. But the natives do not get disturbed by the news and continue their festivities unperturbed- signifying that their world has already ended.

Cultural loss becomes the central theme of Alexie’s “the american indian holocaust museum.” The idea of a museum is itself problematised. A museum is a space where artifacts of the past might be embellished when that particular culture could not be preserved, rather destroyed brutally. The very items are given an ornamental value with the creation of the belief that the museum preserves a past. The Native Americans sold their valuables at the pawn shops in exchange for some money and they could never redeem their things. A century later the Native Americans pay to look at their own belongings in a museum which get commodified. Cultures are systematically degraded only to be displayed later in monetized terms.

What do we indigenous people want from our country?

We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.

We are waiting for the construction of our museum . . . We are the sons and daughters of the walking dead. We have lost everyone.

(from *Inside Dachau*)

The poem contains a sharp poignant reality of the lives of indigenous people. Their loss cannot be counted. Their grief is so much that they can no longer feel it and have become numb to it. Alexie is tracing a history of suppression when he uses phrases such as ‘mass graves,’ ‘shoes of our dead,’ ‘veterans of the Indian wars’ and his generation is addressing the world that they are the great-grandchildren of the dead of the wars. However, being distant in time has not evaded the scars of oppression and loss, and the present generation equally feels and grieves for the loss of their fathers and mothers and the past that they inhabited. Ironically, the poet says that they can only revisit the past in a museum whose construction they are waiting for. The white settlers are being satirized as they destroyed that which they are now claiming to preserve and celebrate.

Alexie’s life since childhood at the rural reservation and the experience of witnessing harsh economic realities around him including widespread alcoholism is the subject matter of much of his fiction and poetry. His novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* which won the National Book Award is deliberately written in the novel form rather than a memoir as Alexie revisits experiences from his own life. But he feels that if written in a memoir fashion, the reader would render these experiences unbelievable. Therefore they had to be given an imaginative coloring by the author. His other books on similar subjects include *The Toughest Indian in the World*, *Ten Little Indians*, *Flight*, and *War Dances*.

*The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses* were his first published works of poetry, both published in 1992. In 1993, he earned a PEN/Hemingway Award for the first best book of fiction for

his collection of short stories entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. In all of his works Alexie uses the power of storytelling to link the past and present; at the same time the pathos of tragic situations is infused with laughter as there is a refusal to submit to the oppressive forces. P. Jane Hafen notes, "In the face of dismal reservation life and urban life crises of self, community and identity, he can make me laugh, often by inventing imagery and turning inside jokes. He helps make the pain bearable."

Alexie has not only voiced reservation issues but also has made his focus the 'transformation of tribal identity in contemporary society and culture' (134). Nancy J. Peterson, with regard to Alexie's volume of poetry, observes, "Many of the poems in *The Summer of Black Widows* speak to the urgent need of justice, spiritual renewal and ethical obligations. What is particularly striking about this volume is the degree to which Alexie fuses poetic form and technique with an Indigenous critique of white America and its assumptions. The poems gathered in this volume employ form as a rhythmic means for creating a politically and ethically charged poetic space that articulates a tribal worldview." "For instance, in a poem like "Capital Punishment," the poet presents the consciousness of an Indian man about to be put to death by the authorities. In a sonnet titled "Tattoo Tears" the poet infuses the issues of mining, fishing and water ecology. The Spokane River has been irrevocably polluted and its flow damaged due to dam projects and contamination caused due to uranium mining. Alexie mourns the loss of salmon in his poems. The salmon was also associated with Spokane beliefs and rituals. "Haibun" specifically deals with the problem of uranium mining in the reservations. The poet poses the sharp distinction between the white men who leave after work and the tribal people who have to continue living there in the contaminated region.

Significantly, Alexie reworks traditional forms of prose and poetry and liberates the readers from the assumption that they are essentially European forms of writing. The sonnet, for instance, could re-emerge as an Indigenous form. He makes form suitable for his own native indigenous consciousness. As Peterson asserts, "By working within and

against poetic rules- all the while singing Native American realities- Alexie creates a borderlands poetic space where the rhythms of the sonnet, couplet, haiku, and other forms become fused/ transfused/ transformed with the rhythms of fancy- dancing, chanting, playing basketball, powwows, salmon swimming upriver, and all other images of his painful and loving vision of Native America.”

### **Works Cited**

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