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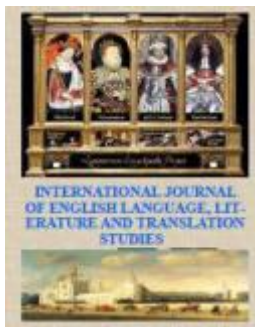
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FORGIVENESS AND THE LOVE OF MANKIND IN *FLIGHT* AND *THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE
DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*

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ABSTRACT

Flight and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* are explorations of trauma of ongoing colonialism which led to the violence of American culture.

Flight and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* are narratives of American Indian trauma and the characters bear witness to this ongoing suffering due to colonialism. The grief of the Native Americans are due to the fact that their altogether loss is never acknowledged! It is the grief of characterizing them as subhuman beings incapable of experiencing or expressing human emotions. These kinds of negative constructions of American Indians have led to the point that these helpless Indians have no right to mourn and therefore there is no need to express grief for them or empathize with.

Of course, the soul of the Indian is wounded since colonialism started in America. *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* a whiff of air is let loose to extinguish the fire of holocaust. An element of forgiveness runs its course through *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* right from the later half of the novel. Arnold's grandmother meets with a road accident. Instead of trying to get punishment to the drunken driver of the motor vehicle which hit her, she utters, "Forgive him". This sets the stage for Arnold to forgive his father and his tribe for considering him as a traitor. He himself forgives his father and his entire tribe for considering him as a traitor. He himself forgives him for leaving the reservation. He cries for the alcohol-related deaths of his father, his father's friend Eugene and finally for the death of his sister thinking, "... five or ten or fifteen more Spokane Indians would die during the next year,...and get the hell of the rez,...". He likens the reservation to a prison constructed to make Indians die and disappear (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*,216).

Keywords

Reservation, Trauma, Holocaust Reconcile, Enlightenment, Foster family, *Multiculturalism*, Genocide.

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INTRODUCTION

Sherman Alexie was born on October 7, 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington as the son of Sherman Joseph Alexie, a Coeur d'Alene Indian and Lillian Agnes (née Cox) Alexie, a Spokane Indian. He underwent a brain operation when he was six months old which resulted in frequent seizures. Alexie turned out to be a voracious reader; he read *The Grapes of Wrath* when he was only five years old. These personal traits made him different from others; so, he was often bullied by other boys in the reservation.

One day Alexie found his mother's name written on the geography textbook given to him.

He was deeply affected by the prevalence of the poverty in the reservation and thus sought a better education at the high school in Reardan, Washington where he was a top student and a star basketball player. Upon graduation in 1985, Alexie attended Gonzaga University on a scholarship.

He got transferred to Washington State University (WSU) after two years to study pre-med. Alexie hoped to become a medical doctor, but later he decided to change career goals because he kept fainting during human anatomy class.

Luckily, Sherman Alexie happened attend a poetry workshop through the University and, with encouragement from the poetry teacher, Alex Kuo, he began to polish his writing.

Sherman Alexie soon graduated from WSU with a degree in American Studies.

His first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems* was published in 1992. In 2002, it was adapted into a film that Alexie wrote and directed; it received mixed reviews and inspired him to quit drinking, as he had become an alcoholic throughout college.

Literary Career: Sherman Alexie's first collection of short stories, entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published in 1993 and was awarded both a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction and a Lila Wallace- Reader's Digest Writers' Award. This novel was followed by its sequel, *Reservation Blues*, in 1995, which won the 1996 American Book Award and Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and the Murray Morgan Prize as well as being name one of Granta's Best of Young American Novelists. Another novel published later that year entitled *Indian Killer* also was declared a New York Times notable.

Sherman Alexie moved into music in 1996, collaborating with musician Jim Boyd to create songs for the book *Reservation Blues* and also toured with Boyd and the Indigo Girls at a concert to benefit the Honor the Earth Foundation.

In 2003, Sherman Alexie returned to WSU as speaker for the commencement ceremonies. The university then presented him with their highest honour for alumni, the Regent's Distinguished Alumnus Award.

Alexie collaborated with Chris Eyre, a fellow Native American, on the film *Smoke Signals*, based on a short story by Alexie. The film won a Christopher Award.

The pair rewrote one of Alexie's short stories, "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," into a screenplay. The resulting film, *Smoke Signals*, premiered at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival and went on to win several awards.

Themes

Sherman Alexie can easily be considered a contemporary Renaissance man. Much of Sherman Alexie's work deals with disparate images of America and challenges the contemporary social perceptions of American history. He decided as a teenager to leave after finding his own mother's name in one of his textbooks, meaning, of course, that they had been teaching with the same book for over thirty years. Sherman Alexie at this point made a conscious decision to attend school in nearby Reardan, Washington to gain a better education.

DISCUSSION

Flight and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* are great literary works about overcoming boundaries which leads to finding greater strength within. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* portrays the struggle between the white world and the bleak Indian world. Here, hard realities punch right on the face. It is an amazing literary masterpiece about overcoming boundaries which leads to finding greater strength within. This novel portrays the struggle between the white world and the bleak Indian world. Here,

hard realities punch right on the face. Forgiveness is the message in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is further reinforced by the words of Arnold's grand mother; she was run over by a vehicle driven by a drunken driver and speaking about him she says, 'forgive him'.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian and *Flight* are narratives of American Indian trauma and the characters bear witness to this ongoing suffering which is the result of colonialism. These are explorations of trauma of ongoing colonialism which led to the violence in American culture. The grief of the Native Americans is due to the fact that their altogether loss is never acknowledged! The grief is augmented by characterizing them as subhuman beings incapable of experiencing or expressing human emotions. These kinds of negative constructions of American Indians have led to the point that these helpless Indians have no right to mourn and therefore there is no need to express grief for them or to empathize with them.

Both Arnold and Zits are hopeful of human beings. This is evident when they face with a situation where they are to orient themselves. Arnold need not bother about reviving his old friendship with Rowdy who had severely beaten him up in the face. Arnold suffered lot of physical and mental pain while participating in the basketball match against his old school in the Spokane reservation.

Arnold in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* eventually seems to be nurturing a cosmopolitan outlook. He is a part-time Indian travelling to and fro between the reservation and the white world of the all white school at Rearden. He could easily adapt himself to the requirements of the changing environments of the reservation and the all whites school. There is positive quality and a light in his eyes when he looks at these different worlds of diverse cultural values. He proves that one could amalgamate the positive aspects of these cultural diversities of a society characterized by multi-culturalism.

The white boy, Justice, in *Fight* could show empathy to the Indians. Likewise, Zits could also view things in a broad sweep by showing magnanimity when it comes to the question of shooting down customers of the bank. There happens enlightenment in the mind of Zits vis-a-vis the sacredness and value of human life and spirit.

Arnold seems to have a vast store of tolerance evidenced in his suffering of atrocities from Rowdy. At the end of the novel, he calls Arnold a 'nomad' when he approaches Rowdy extending a hand of friendship. Anyhow, Rowdy finally accepts the fact that Arnold has joined the all whites school at Rearden. All these things denotes the level of tolerance and the hope that Arnold has about mankind. Arnold is not at all disappointed at any stage in trying out the friendship with Rowdy. Although he gets often rebuttals in the act, Arnold is able to make reconciliation with Rowdy after he accepts the fact that Arnold has joined the all whites school at Rearden.

Arnold reaches the levels of forgiveness and love of mankind stage by stages only. He in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* not only struggles a lot to reconcile the multiple layers of his identity but also eventually comes out with a unified personality amalgamating the traits of divergent worlds into a complete or harmonious identity. Arnold discovers or formulates his individuality only after establishing peer relationships in Rearden school. Later, the norms of his Indian community are also blended with his newly found individuality. This naturally paves the way for the creation or birth of his identity. Thus, in the case of the identity of Arnold one element cannot be separated from the other. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a typical young adult novel highlighting the importance of establishing a complete individual after balancing the divergent traits within and without the protagonist.

It is his hope in people and human life that drives Arnold to join Rearden school even by incurring the displeasure and aversion from his community members including his intimate friend Rowdy. His parents are apprehensive of adverse reactions from the reservation but they permits him to join Rearden school. They are fully convinced of self-determination and the spirit of self-reliance of Arnold which are the corner stones of American dream.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Arnold Spirit comes to terms with his own identity. Here, Alexie, as in the case of collected stories of *Ten Little Indians*, refutes the notion of the whites that Native

Americans are groping in the dark without any identity of their own. Thus Alexie very effectively challenges the stereotype that whites have about the First Nation people of America.

Members of his Indian community called him an 'apple' after he joined the all-whites school in Rearden. He is called 'apple' because he is coloured white inside with a red skin. But, at the end the people in reservation like Rowdy come out to accept the fact that Arnold is after all the old Junior whose colour of the skin and the inner core never clash with each other. Both the outer surface and inner core of his person are same.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is an instance of instruction and celebration of the power of positive thinking in changing the destinies of human beings. We can affect lot of changes in our course of life depending on our mental programming. This is an illustration of the American Dream come true. It is a novel about hope. The identity that Arnold forges is not the identity of a 'rez kid' or a student of Rearden school; but it is a new kind of identity created simultaneously with the process of reconciliation and enlightenment. With self-determination Arnold fights against all odds in his life because he has hope in life and in human beings. This has finally led him to the great heights of reconciliation and enlightenment. He has hope since he has belief in himself. He is optimistic of things which can later change things in a positive way. There were times when he seemed to collapse in front of myriad forms of obstacles on his way of life. But, he squarely dealt with all those things by anchoring on his innate strength of character. He fights back clasp firmly the horns of the charging bull.

Arnold tries to boost up his level of hope by preparing a 'Hope List'. This list consists of the names of his dear ones and favourite things in life which brings him joy.

There is the irony in the concept of reconciliation between minority culture and Euro-American culture. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Arnold has to face some of his physical deformities like hydrocephalia, seizures, and stuttering defiantly. His parents are also alcoholics. Seniors in the reservation often bully him and it is Rowdy who protects him. Arnold came up in life by opting for reconciliation with these deformities and hard life of the reservation. For him, reservation is a prison of poverty.

The social boycott that Arnold suffered was there not only in his reservation but even at Rearden as well. The racial prejudice that he suffered in Rearden is in the form of his peers bullying him or ignoring him totally. But, gradually, he adjusts himself to the new cultural surroundings in Rearden and he becomes the star varsity basket ball player leading Rearden team to victory over his former reservation team with Rowdy as its ace player.

Anyway, these experiences actually benefits Arnold in a big way. The troubles that he suffered from the hands of his peers in Rearden school and from his community at the reservation are lessons for him in his future growth on different lines.

There is a paradoxical situation in that the improvement in condition for Arnold in Rearden high school is followed by a setback in his domestic and social condition in reservation. Arnold faces a chain of tragedies in his personal life. One fine morning his sister Mary left the house. It was a daring act imitating her brother Arnold who joined the all whites school at Rearden and married her lover. Both of them faced tragic death on trailer fire. Then his amazing grandmother died in a road accident. Thirdly, his father's best friend Eugene was shot dead in the head.

It was a difficult problem for Arnold to reconcile the dual identities. Finally, he succeeds in integrating both these worlds of reservation and Rearden into a harmonious whole as he approaches his old intimate friend in reservation, Rowdy.

The personal grief of Arnold is inversely connected to the historical trauma of the American Indians. The innumerable abuses suffered by him stand for the abuses heaped on Native Americans. He reacts aggressively to those who are out of the purview of this kind of shameful life. Just as Arnold keeps track of the positive aspects of his life with a 'Hope List', for being positive, Zits in *Flight* finds solace with his favourite books and spending time with homeless Indians wandering in downtown Seattle area. The mere act of Zits in spending time with other Indians is symbolic of the social nature of the trauma or grief of Indians. There is a

smooth transition from the personal trauma of Zits to the trauma of American Indians at large. But, there is no such trauma of a personal nature or communal nature in 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian'. Arnold never suffers any such grief in proportion to the one suffered by Zits. Arnold suffers a kind of ostracization from his community after joining the white school in Rearden. Arnold has to suffer racial prejudice from the students of Rearden. But, these experiences of Arnold are not equal to the trauma suffered by Zits in *Flight* that suffered or even by John Smith in *Indian Killer*. The trauma suffered by Zits and John Smith do cross at personal and communal levels. Their grief is bound with racial aggression which started with European colonialism of more than five hundred years. This trauma has become part of the racial memory of American Indians. The personal experience of trauma of characters like Zits and John Smith is shared into the collective consciousness of the horrors of racial subjugation and the resultant trauma suffered by the American Indians (Jung, Carl). Zits travel through space and time helps to bring home the historical with all intensity.

The patriotic feelings of Zits and John Smith and other Native Americans for their cultural preservation and the anxiety caused by European invasion are latent in the hopefulness and the element of reconciliation of Zits and Arnold. There is a photograph of the Apache warrior Geronimo emblazoned on his dirty T-shirt. The words are written on it in capital letters, "FIGHTING TERRORISM SINCE 1942". Here, the notion of terrorism is put upside down. The Euro-Americans used to treat the Natives as terrorists. These Euro-Americans have altogether exterminated hundreds of millions of indigenous people during the past five hundred years of colonization. It is a paradox that these same people are here qualified as terrorists. It conveys the perspective of American Indians that they were invaded and terrorized by the whites. The grief of the American Indians is the disenfranchised grief; their spring was ransacked by the white dominant culture. Zits' time travel reveals that this dominant culture is least concerned about the havoc of holocaust heaped on the Native people. Zits tells that the "white did this to Indians" (*Flight*, 136).

While Arnold at the end goes for reconciliation, Zits is subjected to a healing process making a happy ending for the novel. This is great as the protagonist is a victim of intense trauma. The redemption of Zits has more appeal to the readers than the reconciliation of Arnold. The enlightenment going through the life of Zits is born out of hopefulness and altruism. But, in the case of Arnold it is the pleasure of the protagonist to go to his roots: here it is his community members and his close friend, Rowdy. The 'soul wound' of Zits is the general anguish of the indigenous people which he is trying to address at the end. In both *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* the protagonists Zits and Arnold deal with Indians and whites in healing their wounded souls. The kinds of cross-racial extension of these characters allude to the hopefulness of Alexie's heroes as reaction to the trauma of sufferings. These heroes are bidding farewell to the life marked by anger and violence. There is vast difference between the nihilism of John Smith and the inter-racial camaraderie of Zits and Arnold. Zits and Arnold are accommodative of the pain of other people. They empathized with the sufferings of people belonging to different races. This cross-racial feelings mark the two novels *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* which were published after the 9/11 demolition of World Trade Centre.

Of course, the soul of the Indian is wounded since colonialism started in America. *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* a whiff of air is let loose to extinguish the fire of holocaust. An element of forgiveness runs its course through *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* right from the later half of the novel. Arnold's grandmother falls victim to a road accident. Instead of trying to get punishment to the drunken driver of the motor vehicle which hit her, she utters, "Forgive him" (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, 157). This sets the stage for Arnold to forgive his father and his tribe for considering him as a traitor. He himself forgives his father and his entire tribe for considering him as a traitor. He himself forgives him for leaving the reservation. He cries for the alcohol-related deaths of his grandmother, father, his father's friend Eugene and finally for the death of his sister thinking, "... five or ten or fifteen more Spokane Indians would die during the next year,...and get the hell of the rez,..." (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 216). He likens the reservation to a prison, constructed to make Indians die and disappear (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 216). After the death of Eugene, his father's best friend,

Arnold was struck with too much grief. He says, "...We Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost" (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 173).

In *Flight* the foster families of Zits are all white. Moreover, their attitude to Zits was characterized by love and consideration. The parents in the foster homes give love that Zits desperately needs. They are the archetypes for caregivers.

The language of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* also has a note of optimism. The compassion and empathy are born out of love of mankind. Arnold leaves reservation out of deep-rooted love for his tribal community. By this choice Arnold is only setting a model for other Indian youth of the reservation. It is a paradigm shift for the entire young men across various Indian reservations.

He has forgiven Rowdy in spite of all the setbacks he received from him for the friendly overtures that he has shown to him. Finally, Arnold finds positive results on the part of Rowdy. He has accepted the hands of friendship of Arnold which gives a note of hope to the ending of this novel. Arnold's father is an alcoholic. He does not turn up during Christmas celebration. When he came back later he has given Arnold a five dollar bill which smells alcohol and cigarette. His father being a drunken fellow never prevented Arnold from loving him. He has forgiven his father whole heartedly. It is as if the Native Americans cherish human relationships as one of the Ten Commandments. In *Flight*, Zits, finally, forgives all of the oppressors of his community. Zits is denied of a decent family life by these oppressors. But, he extends olive branch to them in return. Here, it is worthwhile to remember a quote by Desmond Tutu, the Nobel laureate South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop; he says that there is "no future without forgiveness..."(Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*). Alliances with his community and with other races are possible only by the act of forgiveness. Thus forgiveness extends not only in forgiving regeneration of old friendship but it also leads to establishing cross-racial alliances.

The protagonist, Arnold is a beacon light to youth who face troubles and traumas in their life. He is marked for his resiliency. At the end, it is seen, the protagonist comes back to his community; not at all leaving it for ever. Arnold is helping himself as much as he can which eventually help his community also. Arnold may spur the change by inspiring other youngsters in the reservations to leave off the reservations for getting educated in schools like Rearden school.

The message that is being conveyed in this book is the necessity for the youth to escape from the demoralized and defeated world of reservation. Young adults are interested in this book because like Arnold they also visualize about having their community in the reservation for acquiring knowledge and skills and then come back to the community to help it.

Finally, Arnold expresses his regret over leaving the reservation. It does not mean that he is sorry about joining Rearden school. This is only to underscore his attachment to his community. His personal growth, at any cost, is not divorced from the community which brought him up.

The personal growth of Arnold and his connection with the community are not dichotomous. There may be hundreds of native people who had cut off from their community after achieving their personal growth. But, Arnold is not such an individual; He always cherishes the remembrances of the good old days that he had spent in the reservation especially with Rowdy.

This is the positive message to other youths in the impoverished situations to break free and pursue their dreams. The reservation is a world of stagnation and isolation. Arnold is the alter ego of Alexie and it implies the desire of the protagonist to break free from such a hopeless world. The final game of basketball between Arnold and Rowdy symbolizes the reconciliation of identity crisis of Arnold. Rowdy calls him a "nomadic" (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, 229) Indian as a gesture of acceptance of the fact that Arnold is beyond the limit of a single tribe; Rowdy is involuntarily acceding to the argument that Arnold is of multi-tribal identity. He approximates humanity and his appeal is multi-dimensional and extends to whole of mankind.

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