

JOHN SMITH RENDERED HORS DE COMBAT: THE TRAUMA DRAMA OF THE PROTAGONIST OF *INDIAN KILLER*

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Abstract:

In recent years, the concept of historical trauma has been mainly applied with American Indians and Alaskan Native populations who are victims of genocide and equally devastating assimilation policies have made tremendous impact on the Native psyche are Removal and Relocation, Reservations, Boarding Schools and Termination that has resulted in the historic trauma of the community. The above mentioned policies have produced a soul wound on the collective and individual psyche of the Native communities and have been passed on as intergenerational trauma to successive generations. Though these policies are of the past, the devastating impact they have created are eternal. Alexie recaptures this traumatic impact in multiple contexts in the contemporary Native world in his novel the Indian Killer. The whole life of the protagonist, John Smith, a Native American forms the metaphor for relocation and the resultant identity crisis. Adoption serves the purpose of his relocation to Smiths, the white American, family where John faces the total impact of being removed from his Native culture, identity and land. This article is an earnest attempt to closely scrutinise the historical trauma predicament of the protagonist John Smith, who is trapped in an urban wilderness, dealing with the perils of modern urban life, at last ends up committing suicide unable to locate his cultural loyalty.

Key words: *Historical trauma, Natives, genocide, assimilation, adoption, soul wound.*

Of all the novels of Alexie the *Indian Killer* captures the essence of the psychological conflict of the historical trauma. The trauma of the novel arises from the removal and relocation of John, an Indian baby, immediately after his birth to an upper middle class white couple, Olivia and Daniel. Alexie has portrayed Olivia and Daniel as gentle and loving, on the other hand totally ineffective parents who can be considered as metaphor for America's paternalistic attitude. Though driven by the good intention of bringing up the Indian child in Indian way of life they are neither capable of ignoring their adopted baby's Indian race nor capable of initiating John to proper Indian tradition and culture. As a result, John from his childhood inherits the Indian stereotypes that his parents has exposed him to and never has a chance to understand or experience the real Indian and their culture and tradition. John considers himself to be an "Indian in the most generic sense" (IK 31) and "he was an Indian without a tribe" (IK 35).

With Black hair, brown skin, brown eyes, high cheek bones and prominent nose and with an ironic family name of Smith, John, the son of white parents inculcates the trauma of dislocation and rootlessness in his heart from a very young age. John feels ostracized from others. John's exclusion gradually develops a feeling of inferiority in contrast to the other white students, in his school, whom he deems to be more intelligent and complex than himself. The parents of the girl children always warned their daughters to keep away from John. John would understand the nuances of the relationship that he experiences with his white friends and teachers that constantly reiterates his ethnicity in spite of his adopted status. This sense of rootlessness often makes him feel "less than real" (IK 17).

John's rootlessness that denies an authentic identity engenders rage within him.

Daniel and John, once go to watch basketball game at Indian Heritage gym played by Sioux team and the local team of Yakama Indians. For the first time John gets the opportunity of watching Indians closely. His misguided ideologies about Indians as silent and stoic crumbles down, when he finds these Indians talking, cracking jokes and laughing loudly. John's perception of Indians as noble savages is reformed by the romanticizing descriptions of Indians and their culture in the books that John is provided with. John wishes their laughter. They are not stoic and magical the way he assumes them to be but these Indians watching the game, are highly expressive, moaning and groaning at each shot. "But always they were laughing. John had never seen so many happy people. He did not share their happiness" (*IK* 21). Unable to reconcile between the real Indians and his idea of real Indians "John felt like crying. He did not recognize these Indians. They were nothing like the Indians he had read about, John felt betrayed" (*IK* 22).

John who can never become a white man and unable to be a real Indian who "could have called the wind" (*IK* 24), to strike his perceived enemies pathetically feels "like a fraud at urban powwows" (*IK* 35) and stumbles down in the maze of identity without a way out. Nancy Van Styvendale comments:

John's invisibility his inability to see and recognize himself as a "real" Indian propels him to search for and re-enact authenticity through a complex of colonial discourses of Indianness instilled in him by his adoptive parents and his mentor, the Spokane Jesuit Father Duncan. Through their performative reiteration of these discourses function to install authentic Indianness as not only unrecoverable but also unachievable and, consequently, to fuel John's murderous rage at a society that has refused him not only his roots but even his own pain. (350)

John, who is a victim of identity crisis, undergoes trauma from his very small age due to the stark difference in the physical appearances of himself and that of his parents which is a nagging remainder of the irresolvable racial difference. His inability to identify himself as a real Indian with real Indians and to belong to the real Indian world that which is far removed from his idea of the real Indians.

John very well manages to suppress his anger because he believes he wants to be "a real person" (*IK* 19). Also "once or twice a week he felt the need to run and hide" (*IK* 19). This unattended, uncontrolled grief and rage proves dangerous to himself because John's profound rage slowly undermines his mental stability and John "gently goes mad during the course of the book" states Alexie (Tomson 28). John is under constant agony and confusion and believes that a white man is responsible for all sins against Indians and decides he "need to kill a white man" (*IK* 25). John is not sure of which white man is responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (*IK* 27). John's rage is therefore, a result of "both of his being appropriated and of his appropriation of an available discourse of Nateness" (Stevendale 351).

In the novel, John, right from his childhood is not portrayed as a normal child who enjoys the love and comfort of his parents as well as the comfort of his social milieu. John, at the age of five realizes that his parents are white and he is brown and understands that the difference in skin colour is important. He feels the cold and embarrassment when he understands that, "He did not look like his parents. He wanted to look like his parents. He rubbed at his face, wanting to wipe the brown away" (*IK* 306).

In an interview with Ase Nygren, Alexie states, "I feel that it is true that pain is carried in the DNA. And because it is carried in the DNA, pain can mutate through generations" (Peterson 148). Scholars of Native American trauma studies who contend that the soul wound or "dark nucleus" (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 23) is transmitted from generation to generation through blood memory and via the familial environment, resonate with Sherman Alexie's thoughts. The sombre nature of John Smith from his very childhood can be attributed to this blood memory which is carried in the DNA. There are no clues that whether John assumes a soft-spoken, introvert, lonely qualities after his realisation of the essential difference in the skin colour between his parents and of his own or he is made of those qualities by birth. But his internal conflict of agitation and confusion begins from the day of his realization of the racial

difference and as a consequence John is driven by trauma. He slowly and steadily comes under the grip of psychological disorder which is evident by the noises in his head:

He was young, may be ten years old, when it first happened, this noise in his head. He was young may be, may be ten year old, when he heard strange music. It happened as he ran from school across the parking lot, towards the car where Olivia waited for him. He knew this music was written especially for him. Violin, bass guitar, piano, harmonica, drums. (*IK* 23)

As John grows from boyhood to adulthood his psychological discomforts too increases in dynamics and dimensions. An array of disorders characteristics of historical trauma symptoms sets in. John leaves Olivia and Daniel's home shortly after high school graduation to become a construction worker. Ever since, reading an article on Mohawk Indian, steel workers who helped build the World Trade Centre, John has disclaimed about working on skyscrapers because he considers it to be the Indian thing to do. John's mood swings are too drastic. He becomes increasingly withdrawn from his parents as well as the society. Frequently he resides in seclusion of his room with the accompaniment of loud powwow music until morning. Alexie suggests John's loud playing of the music might be that, "he could not hear himself thinking about his mysterious origins" (*IK* 114). It is symptomatic of repetitive trauma to amplify and generalize the physiological symptoms of PTSD. Chronically traumatized people are "hyper vigilant, anxious and agitated without any recognizable baseline state of calm or comfort" (qtd. by Herman 380).

John fragmented and tortured from within due to repeated traumatization, is engulfed by drastic mood swings. Once, John in his twenty, strongly imagines himself to be pregnant and forces himself to throw up every morning in order to make others believe his pregnancy. John gets himself prepared for the delivery with all birth supportive arrangements on the delivery day he has been waiting for the baby. "He watched the digital clock, 7:51, 7:52, 7:53. But the baby would not come John felt his stomach, wished for labour pain, and heard the music growing louder and louder" (*IK* 98). Though John is terribly disappointed by the futile labour, he comes to term with reality and understands he has never been pregnant.

John's sense of suspicion exceeds all boundaries to the extent that he is scared of consuming the food and pills brought by Olivia and Daniel Smith to his apartment on their usual visits, which John dislikes and avoids. He could not make out between so many different pairs of Olivia and Daniel Smith in his imaginations.

Apart from Marie Polatkin a Spokane Indian, who is a student of the University of Washington and Spokane Indian Jesuit priest Father Duncan. John's trust worthy friends are the two black men Paul and Paul Too of the donuts shop where John Smith frequently visits early in the morning at two. He sits in his customary chair on Paul Too's donuts shop because:

... strange chairs were dangerous for him. They shifted shape, became unrecognizable. Once he learned to trust a chair it stayed a chair.
People worked that way, too. If John learned to trust somebody like
Paul and Paul Too in the donut shop, then those people became chairs, Comfortable, predictable. A safe chair and safe people were the most valuable things in the world. (*IK* 303)

John waits till Paul Too consumes the food to testify that the food is not poisonous. John's range of suspicion exceeds the limit when he becomes suspicious of all that he has been so far comfortable with.

Along the years, the sound inside John's head has grown and it is at times the voice of Father Duncan, at times the noise of the crowd and at times the sound of a music band. The heat and noise in his head grows loud and painful. At first he is able to control his sudden outburst of impulses, fearing others would notice him but as years move by John starts talking to himself. Already shy and scared John withdraws from his family and his social milieu and dissociates himself by totally stopping to talk and staying silent for a couple of weeks at a stretch at times.

John often fills his void by indulging in imagination about his birth mother and his life in reservation. In those imaginations John leads a Utopian life where everything is perfect. He is surrounded by his mother, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. His reservation life is filled with love and security of his mother and his extended family members who live in the same house.

John, driven by fantasy and imagination, “often visited reservations searching for his mother, answers, some kind of family” (*IK* 126). His frequent visits to many reservations could not fetch him any result but contributes to his growing frustration. John's identity crisis stems from his internalisation of the Indian stereotypes as well as due to being an Indian without definitive tribal identity in a predominantly white society. Unable to resolve his sense of rootlessness, John is traumatized from a very early age.

His unresolved grief fuels immense and terrific rage that he himself confesses to Father Phil, “All the anger in the world has come to my house. It's there in my closet. In my refrigerator, in the water, in the sheets. It's in my clothes. Can you smell it? I can never run away from it” (*IK* 200).

The profundity of John's rage provokes him to decide that he needs “to kill a white man” (*IK* 25) in order to redress everything that has gone wrong. John believes that “White people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile” (*IK* 30). John wanted to change that. “He wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes” (*IK* 30). Prompted by such a desire he imagines holding his boss, a construction foreman, over the edge of the last skyscraper in Seattle. “He would hold unto the foreman as long as possible and stare down into these terrified blue eyes. Then he'd let him fall” (*IK* 25). Ironically at the end of the novel it is John who ends up falling from the skyscraper. His internalised rage and disparity ends up in his suicide.

John's unquenchable rage to kill a white man, his mysterious behaviours and his appearance of a cinematic warrior, helps to identify him as a potential suspect as the Indian killer. Though, John is not the Indian killer, sought after in the story for murdering a series of white Seattle men and kidnapping a white kid. Though, John is violently tormented by his internal drastic mood swings, he never projects his internal turmoil upon others in the form of violence, both physically and verbally. Throughout the novel, though he is provoked by racist arrogance at many instances in Seattle by white characters, John never enters into the realm of violence. On the contrary he is taken aback withdraws himself away from such situations. Alexie portrays John scared, withdrawn and harmless like a lost child in a strange world. There are false clues that construct parallels between the grotesque serial killer, the villain and John. For example, when Alexie describes, “The Killer saw the fear in the white man's blue eyes. The man's fear inspired the Killer's confidence” (*IK* 52) it clearly coincides with John Smith's burning desire to see fear in blue eyes.

Nancy Van Styvendale accentuates that, “The very name, which can be read as either “killer of Indians” (like Custer, the most notorious “Indian killer”) or “killer Indian” or both, involves the inter implication of colonial genocide and Native vengeance, and suggests that this character encompasses a history larger than its individual parts” (Styvendale 352). Alexie has created John Smith and the Indian killer in order to illustrate the traumatic historical conditions that are inclusive of a collective intergenerational anger. Alexie in an interview with Tomson Highway explains the purpose of creating the character of John Smith:

I've met a lot of people like him “lost birds” Indians adopted out by non-Indian families we call them lost birds. One of my cousins was adopted out. I wanted to write a book about a character like that to get this out into the public. The Indian Child Welfare Act in the States in 1974 prevented such adoptions. The social problem and dysfunction of these Indians adopted out are tremendous. Their suicide rates are off the chart, their drug and alcohol abuse rates are off the chart. (*Conversations with Sherman Alexie* 28)

The removal and relocation of indigenous children by white colonizers, generally referred to as the stolen generation is considered as a greatest injustice committed against the indigenous population in settler controlled states. Hollinger in his article “Beyond the Best Interests of the Tribe: The Indian Welfare

Act and the Adoption of Indian Children”, states that the implementation of ICW Act recognizes the theft, removal and relocation of Indian children from their communities as a neo-colonial assault on the “most valuable natural resources”(qtd. By Styvendale 350) of Native communities says Hollinger. Alexie has carved out John to be the perfect paradigm of such relocated children whose rootlessness results in psychological trauma. In an interview with Tomson Highway, Alexie remarks that John “Gently goes mad during the course of the book” (Peterson 28). John's apparent schizophrenia can be considered as a metaphor for the fragmented and tortured psyche inculcated by deracination. Van Stevendale aptly refers to Sam Durant's ideology that the immoderate grief of John Smith “needs to be recognized as a precisely proportionate response to history, a way of bearing witness to losses that exceed the proportions of the individual subject” (qtd. by Styvendale 354). In *Indian Killer*, the traumatic event of adopting out of Native children can be seen as material incarnation of a repetitive trauma that takes place throughout history in multiple historical times instead of being an event that has taken place once in a fixed historical time.

John, the protagonist of *Indian Killer* who is adopted into white family is born in late 1960. The adoption of Indian children into white families has begun in mid twentieth century from 1940's and reached “a high point in the 1950's and 1960's declining in the 1970's when Indian and Black organizations began to attack the practice” (qtd. by James 180). This clearly indicates that the trauma of adopting Native children in the name of assimilation is not a single event that confines to a clearly definable time period of the past which defies the idea that event is singular and chronologically bound.

In *Indian Killer*, a long history of removal and relocation in a more general sense and adoption of Native children into white families in particular, haunts and devastates John Smith's life. John's entire life is propelled by his search for something essential that is grabbed away from him and which he tries to seek through his frequent visits to various reservations, his birth mother and family, and answers for many incongruities in reality. With all the available knowledge of the historic conditions of the Native communities, nothing prevents us from concluding that John's traumatic pain is the symptom of a larger historical loss as well as its contemporary expression than considering it as individual psychological trauma.

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