

SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *INDIAN KILLER*: A SAGA, UNRAVELLING THE IRONY OF POP CULTURE MYTHS

*Aananthi Ballamurugan, Research Scholar, Dept. of English,
Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore*
*Dr. S. Christina Rebecca, Professor and Head, Dept. of English,
Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore*

Abstract:

The main focus of this paper is to unravel the irony of the biased history and the pop culture myths in the lives of the Native Spokane community in Sherman Alexie's novel Indian Killer. The prime source of knowledge about American Indians to the outside world is the biased history and the pop culture myths of the hegemonic white society. But unfortunately, the images and ideas propagated by these medias are not honest records of the Natives. These false, one-sided records glorify the white Americans and degrade the Natives to stereotypes of savage warriors and drunkards, devoid of individuality. The great myth of discovery of America justifies the conquest stories by proudly declaring that, the Natives of America are, eventually, bestowed with religion, civilization and economic comfort. But, ultimately the so called privileges have resulted in apocalypse for the Natives. Moreover, the unfulfilled treaty obligations by the federal government form the major cause for the poor economic conditions of the Natives. Sherman Alexie, in his novel Indian Killer, brings to the fore the ironic condition of the Natives which is exactly the opposite of what is propagated by the pop culture myth.

Keywords: *Natives, pop culture myth, irony, stereotypes, privileges, savage, drunkard, civilization.*

The popularity of pop culture myths on Natives, in the United States, right from the time of its evolution is based on the conventional plots that strongly establish the Euro-American superiority and the stereotyped images of savage warrior, Godless-heathen, lazy welfare citizens, the wise medicine man Shaman, and the stinky drunk Indian. These Native stereotypes are “an arrested, fixated form of representation” (Bhabha 45) of the other that cannot be dismissed as just created for entertainment because hundreds of millions of people around the world have acquired their knowledge about North American Indians through these pop culture myths and especially through western films. “The belief that there is an essence of general truth about American Indians in these portrayals is pervasive and persistent in modern North America . . . even modern American Indians draw heavily from these films in constructing their own views of their cultural heritage” (Price 154).

Native authors are fully aware of and respond to these devastations brought about by the pop culture myths on their communities. Native American scholars from many academic disciplines have constantly raised their voice against the European and Euro-American misrepresentation of Native Americans. The most renowned Native academician and political activist Vine Deloria, Jr., denotes the stereotypical images as “The Indian of the American Imagination” (qtd. by James Cox 52). In general, Native American literature is engaged in counter narratives to the misrepresented history and identity as defined by written and visual pop culture narratives of the hegemonic Euro-American society that tell a story of the European conquest of North America.

The great myth behind the discovery and conquest stories of Europeans is “to save the souls of the natives” (qtd. by Peter d' Errico 18). The papal bull of Pope Alexander VI of 1493, proclaims “catholic faith

and the Christian religion be exalted and everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself . . .” (qtd. by Peter d' Errico 18). So the national myth insists on bestowing the barbarous Natives with civilization and Christianity, but the consequence has proved apocalyptic to the indigenous population. This forms the core of all literary productions of the Native communities throughout America. Sherman Alexie Jr., the Spokane Native American author, with the authenticity of a cultural insider, indulges in unraveling the irony between reality and pop culture myths in his works.

Of all the works of Sherman Alexie Jr., who is a poet, short story write, novelist, screenwriter and a stand-up comedian, *Indian Killer* is considered the most revolutionary because of its vehement resistance to the misrepresented hegemonic narratives. In this novel Alexie addresses the issues of both revisioning of history and the subversion of dominant culture's misrepresented Native American identity. The novel *Indian Killer* often makes reviewers and interviewers uncomfortable. Alexie defends his novel in his interview with Kelley Blewster by explaining that he wrote the novel intending to make white people feel uncomfortable. The main motive behind such a controversial novel is to portray how “Indians are culturally, psychologically, physically, and emotionally killed. Still” (Alexie 73).

Alexie in *Indian Killer* blasts at the nation building myth through the character of Father Duncan, a Spokane Indian Catholic priest, who baptizes John Smith, the protagonist of *Indian Killer*. When the hero John Smith, who is an adopted Native American child, is six years old, one day visits the church with Father Duncan. There, he is bewildered by the stained glass reproduction of Jesuits being martyred by Indians - Jesuits being pierced with dozens of arrows, their cassock torn, escaping from evil-looking Indians, being drowned in a river and being scalped. Little John taken up by the pictures asks the Jesuits Priest “Why did the Indians kill them?” (*Indian Killer* 14). The Spokane Jesuit Father replies “They wanted to kick the white people out of America. Since the priests were the leaders, they were the first to be killed” (*Indian Killer* 14). John curiously asks why all the whites were not killed by the Natives, for which Father Duncan replies that “They didn't have the heart for it” (*Indian Killer* 14). John asks “But didn't white people kill most of the Indians? Duncan replies “Yes, they did” (*Indian Killer* 14). When John asks Duncan whether those priests died like Jesus for the redemption of Indians, Father Duncan could not reply. “Duncan was afraid to answer the question. As a Jesuit, he knew those priests were martyred just like Jesus. As a Spokane Indian, he knew those Jesuits deserved to die for their crimes against Indians” (*Indian Killer* 15). The ultimate mission of the Jesuits is to take the culture and tradition away from the Natives and to bury it forever and replace it with white men's culture, tradition and religion which have ultimately resulted in historical trauma of the Native communities. This particular revisioning of history brightly underscores the apocalypse brought upon by the Natives in the name of civilization and Christianity.

Another myth strongly held by non-Indians is that Indians receive special privileges that other American citizens are not privileged of. Walter C. Flaming in his article “Myth and Stereotypes about Native Americans” quotes the editorial of the electronic edition of the Findlay (Ohio) Courier that states:

It's long been apparent that the laws granting Native American tribes sovereign nation status were a huge mistake. Rather than improving the lives of native people, the laws have created a state of dependency in which the tribes are neither truly sovereign nor fully a part of the larger nation. They are essentially wards of the federal government. They receive some special privileges designed to advance their welfare or maintain their native culture, but for the most part, the laws have made dependent victims of people who should have been integrated into the larger culture. (214)

Alexie brings to limelight the irony of the above mentioned myth through the notorious talk show host Truck Schultz, in *Indian Killer*. He is considered as the worst kind of racist whose provocative narratives invariably dehumanize and sabotage the dignity of the Natives. He reiterates the false one-sided history of the dominant white society that fuels enmity and violence among Natives and non-Natives. Truck Schultz

deliberately misleads his audience in the case of David Roger, a student of the Washington State University who disappears after his visit to Tulalip Tribal Casino.

Even before arriving at any authentic clue on David Rogers missing, Schultz attributes it to the Spokane Indian tribe. Mr. Schultz who has a biased notion of history manipulates it saying that, "We have offered our hands in friendship to the Indians, but they insist on the separation from normal society. They are an angry, bitter people, and treat the rest of us with disdain and arrogance. May be this whole Indian gambling thing is about revenge on the white man" (*Indian Killer* 118). He goes to the extreme of exaggerating it as "The Indian tribes of Washington State have declared a cultural war on us and the weapon they've chosen is the casino" (*Indian Killer* 119). He philosophizes against the establishment of gambling casinos in reservations.

The fact is that the Indian reservations are separate nations that are dependent on federal government based on treaties. The U.S. has made land treaties with the American Indian tribes that promise various means of support like food supplies, weapons, agricultural tools and also protection from other tribes for exchange of huge acres of tribal lands. Based on treaties, casinos are set on reservations in order to improve the financial flow of the poverty stricken reservations. In his interview to Tomson Highway, a first nation Canadian playwright, Alexie mentions:

. . . on my reservation unemployment was about 90 percent before the bingo hall and casino; now it's about 10 percent. They worry about Mafia coming in and taking over the casino. I say, Indians couldn't tell the difference between the Mafia and the United States government. Even if the Mafia did come in and did take over, we'd welcome them, because we'd be better organised and the government wouldn't mess with us. And we'd have much better pasta! No more Kraft macaroni and cheese. (Peterson 22)

Such terse reply reflects both on the poverty level of the reservation and the antagonism of the Natives against the United States because of its centuries of deceit.

While the city of Seattle is stormed by the serial murders of the Indian killer, Truck Schultz, makes use of the opportunity to narrate the dominant version of history that glorifies the colonisers and degrades the colonised. Truck, the white man says "Citizen, I am outraged. What is our society coming to when good men cannot safely walk the streets of our cities?" (*Indian Killer* 207). It is ironic when the white man talks about the danger of being a white because only minorities like Spokane constantly faces danger and discrimination amidst white which Alexie highlights at many instances in his work - Right from John Smith, the protagonist, the minor characters like the homeless Cornelius and Zera, Carlotta, and the numerous homeless Indians on the streets of Seattle and often confront violence and curses like "Go back to where you belong, man! . . . Get the fuck out of our country, man!" (*Indian Killer* 215).

When Truck laments of the white kid, Mark Jones' kidnap "from the safety of his own home" (*Indian Killer* 207), ironically, the readers are reminded of the forceful dislocation of the Indian children from their parents and tribe to the Charlisly Industrial School, for their assimilation into the mainstream white society. Truck's propaganda includes "White males built this country. White males travelled here on the Mayflower, crossed the Great Plain on horseback, brought light to the darkness, and tamed the wilderness. This country exists because of the constant vigilance and the ingenuity of the white males" (*Indian Killer* 207). But the conversation between homeless Carlotta and John Smith in *Indian Killer* brings out the irony in these authentic narratives. She recollects how the Natives have been good to white people when they arrived on the shores of the continent. It is the Natives who taught them to cultivate, to adapt to the environment of the new world by playing the role of a good host. Carlotta also remarks "and then what did they do? They killed us" (*Indian Killer* 253). Her words reflect the massive loss of life through intentional spread of infectious diseases and bloody massacres that has been called the "American Indian Holocaust" (qtd. in "Rethinking Historical Trauma" 301).

As per the white society, the standard of life of the Indians is elevated than their pre-colonized state

because of their contact with the whites- the civilized and the superior race. The Natives are also provided with benefits of technological comforts and above all “They have God” (*IK* 208) who have been earlier “Godless heathens” (*Indian Killer* 208).

In reality the fictional Spokane community is haunted by poverty and hunger. Their basic needs like food and shelter are not met. Empty refrigerators, empty stomach, empty wallets, dependence on the worst standard of commodity food supplies, one room HUD houses and trailer houses are everyday nightmares of the community. Apart from the disillusioned and devastated reservation life *Indian Killer* strongly focuses on the predicaments of the numerous homeless Indians in the city of Seattle who are “in dirty clothes and third hand shoes, miles and years from their reservations, estranged from their families and tribes,” (*Indian Killer* 144) The U.S. government, that has made treaties with Natives to compensate for the land and the gaming, in reality has failed to keep up its promises.

Schultz's version of history as well as contemporary condition is ironic because he narrates exactly the opposite of the actual condition. They are neither 'super citizens' nor technological benefiterers. Above all, it clearly reflects their deracination from their own spirituality. White man's religion has made their life disillusioned and chaotic with a big spiritual void which is obvious in the case of John Smith, the hero of the novel, and Father Duncan both of whom end up their life in suicide.

Since Truck Schultz believes that white America has “Coddled Indians too long” (*Indian Killer* 209), he pontificates “This country is full of welfare babies giving birth to welfare babies” (*Indian Killer* 243). His solution is to sterilize girls with IQ less than one hundred so that “Indian women will not give birth to Indian Killers” (*Indian Killer* 243). Alexie, a cultural insider, brings to the fore the evils inculcated by the biased pop culture myths in the hearts of the whites by the character Truck Schultz.

All that Schultz's considers as privileges for the Natives have not brought about any changes in the lives of the Natives. What Schultz, the representative figure of the white society in the novel fails to understand is that many of these privileges are treaty obligations by the federal government that it has signed, with the tribes for obtaining millions of acres of tribal lands. Since, the government has failed to honour the treaties; the Natives have been economically and socially deprived of the 'broken treaties'. Such biased pop culture narratives of history and culture of the Natives have reduced them to the most misunderstood of the ethnic minorities of the United States.

Works Cited

1. Alexie, Sherman Jr. *Indian Killer*. Warner Books, 1996.
2. Bhabha, Homi and Padmini Mongia, editor. “The Other Question.” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*. Oxford UP, 1996, 37-54.
3. Alexie, Sherman Jr., editor. Interview by Kelley Blewster. “Tribal Visions.” *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*.
4. Cox, James. “Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1997, pp. 52-70, *JSTOR*, Web, 23 Mar. 2014.
5. Denham, Aaron R. “Rethinking Historical Trauma.” Diss. U of Alberta, n.d.
6. Errico, Peter d. “Native Americans in America: A Theoretical and Historical Overview.” *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 14, no.1, 1999, pp. 7-28, *JSTOR*, Web, 19 June 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/1409513?seq=1&cid=pdfreference#references_tab_content
7. Fleming, Walter C. “Myths and Stereotypes About Native Americans.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2006, pp. 213-17, Web, 5 Feb. 2015, www.0611PhiDeltaKappan.qxp.
8. Peterson, Nancy J, editor. *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. UP of Mississippi, 2009.
9. Price, John A. “The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures.” *Ethno history*, vol.20, no. 2, 1973, pp. 153-171, *JSTOR*, Web, 5 June 2014, www.jstor.org/stable/481668.