

## **Sherman Alexie's Discursive Reconstruction of the Native American Subject**

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### **Abstract**

Sherman Alexie's literary discourse counters the white-washed essentializing misrepresentation of the Native American socio-cultural practices as primitive and uncultured. Alexie's poetry and fiction reactivate discursive life patterns of communitism, ritualistic significance of the objects like eagle-feathers, salmon, buffalo, deer, corn and love for Earth with a view to reasserting and imaginatively gaining what the Native Americans have lost in the modern McDonaldized institutionalized environment of the U.S. Alexie incorporates and reinterprets the central metaphors of the West and Christianity like Moses and Jesus Christ from Native American perspectives. Native American subject adjusts itself in the contemporary American milieu. Alexie's Discourse – a system of institutionally supported chain of statements, in Foucauldian sense – is in conscious conflict and competition with the Euro-American Discourse, both with capital "D" because discourse with small "d" focuses on textual features and their coherence and cohesion whereas Discourse with capital D includes institutional support, approval and cognition. Alexie reactivates Native American discursive practices with their original pre-Columbian cultural context in which human beings lived with animals and plants in a horizontal relationship in which there was nothing for man to capture and subjugate. Native American subject caught up in the web of dual bindings of traditional cultural roots and modern socio-cultural patterns passes from straightaway rejection of the white culture to gradual acceptance of the modern cultural compulsions, after recovery of his soul wound resulting from the shock of loss of "everything." Alexie's subject in poetry is concerned with recovery of the past to put it back together whereas in fiction it is concerned with moving forward to the future through partial acceptance of the present.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Native Americans, constructionism

Posing a challenge to the assumption that subject<sup>1</sup> is a meaning-making entity that constructs meaning and then transcribes it into discourse, Foucault theorized a discursively constructed subject. Subject does not exist prior to discourse; it is in and through discourse that the subject thinks, behaves and is constituted. The Euro-American white-washed discourse of history, literature and criticism allows no place to the

Native American subject; Native Americans have been constructed as uncultured and primitive cannibals to find a justification for their genocide. This project excluded Native Americans from the human circumference of representation. Euro-American discursive life with its modern institutionalization has no place for the worship of eagle-feathers, salmon, buffalo, deer, corn and love for Earth. Alexie's poetry and fiction reactivate pre-Columbian discursive life patterns. It is naïve to criticize that he wants to push back the Native peoples into their "primitive" culture. His objective is to demonstrate to the world the Native American culture, values and history from the Native perspectives, to show what the Natives have lost and that they still value their past and cherish their roots. Creative efforts of Native American authors like Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Joy Harjo, Louis Erdrich to name a few, have transformed the Natives scattered in various regions of the Southern states into a resistant communal consciousness. As it is ontology<sup>2</sup> that shapes agency,<sup>3</sup> the Native American literature reconfigures the reality to adjust Native identity. The Euro-American ontological position is that the whites are the centre of the universe and Nature is to be used, exploited, administered and subjugated for (the whites') "progress." Emerson's concept of ethical ascent places Nature and darkness at the lowest position. Native American ontology believes in a horizontal relationship of man, Nature, and the supernatural powers: nothing is to be subjugated, sold, purchased and conquered for "progress." In this ontology human beings are in a linear relationship with all things in existence. Alexie's reinterpretation of Christ, Moses, Columbus, buffalo, deer, and eagle serves to frame the ontology that suits the Native purpose and approach to life. For instance, Christ and Moses are given new signification to adjust their meaning for the Indians: "Jesus Christ had already come back for the second time and got crucified again. He called himself Crazy Horse<sup>4</sup> and never said anything about the third attempt" (p. 11). Significance, thus, is not neutral; it takes a perspective. In Alexie's work, canonical figures of western history, religion and politics are appropriated to the Native purpose. Moses, for instance, is appropriated to the Indian context so that instead of communicating the revealed Ten Commandments to the Israelites, he wants to

memorialize every Indian who died in war, fighting for this country and against this country during the last five hundred years, so he began the task of capturing swallows, one for each of the dead, . . . to his mouth and breathed out the name of a fallen Indian: man, woman, child. (Alexie, 1993, p. 12)

And he had to release millions of them into the air over the reservation.

Foucault is concerned with resistance to power, not with oppression since he does not consider power as only oppressive or repressive. It is also simultaneously productive, and something that shapes events and patterns of behavior rather than simply putting constraints on the individual's freedom. For instance, Corliss, the female protagonist of "The Search Engine" in *Ten Little Indians* is made to act within the sphere and demands of technological and academic institutions. She is placed actually within the double binding force of the parents and uncles pulling her to tribalism and her own academic training pushing her to the westernized white mode of thinking. The text does not assert any sweeping sentimental representation of Native American identity. Out of the double bond of association a mixed/hybrid identity emerges.

Euro-American discourse essentializes Native Americans as unchangeable primitive race that is doomed to extinction for its inability to adjust itself to contemporary civilization and for their alcoholism, dependence on public welfare, tobacco and primitivism. The anthropological work of Franz Boas (Jaimes, p. ix), the study of cartoons by Robert Fischer (Kent, p. 78), the sponsoring of such literature through officially sponsored prizes, like the Pulitzer Prize for *Laughing Boy* (1945) by Oliver La Farge, *Hiawatha* by Longfellow, Curtis' (1972) book of pictures of Indians in their "natural" clothing, and the whole plethora of Euro-American discourses constructed the myth of the "vanishing" Indian through literature. This discursive construction presents manufactured authenticity. Alexie's poetic and fictional discourse is blamed to strengthen this manufactured truth because he too refers to the alcoholism and primitive Indian cultural patterns. But this view misses the point of critical literary challenge: the alcoholism of Indians is a truth of their daily life that pervades Native American literature. It has been facilitated and consciously planted amongst Indians but its destructive impact is not ignorable. The focus on the "primitive" cultural patterns of Indians especially in *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* serves to assert and re-establish what has been lost and degraded through Euro-American discursive assault. Another purpose of this focus is to present the alternative version of American history from the Native perspectives as well as insistence on the cultural diversity which is the legitimate right of all communities. It also rebuts the Euro-American single white cultural identity as the only and possible option for "civilized humanity."

This article studies Alexie's literary discursive reconstruction of the Native American subject misconstrued by Euro-American history, media, literature and anthropology. Gee states ". . . it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but rather the Discourses we

represent and enact, and for which we are *carriers*" (p. 35). Discourses function through the coordination of verbal and non-verbal expressions, tools, symbols, things, actions which betoken cultural identities and related activities. These elements of discursivity constitute mind-maps to make social practices intelligible. Human beings act as carriers of discourses with capital D and through them discourses interact performing the seven discursive functions: Significance, Activities, Identities, Relationships, Politics, Connections, and Sign System and Knowledge. Alexie's literary discourse demonstrates communal and discursive contestation with the white context and discourses. In "Do You Know Where I Am?" the protagonist, Sharon's explicit abrogation of and heartrending repentance over her short term relationship with a white man signifies a total breakdown with the white community and return to the Native husband, but, significantly, within the white surroundings and scenario. But Atwater in "The Search Engine" is in a hybrid relationship with his tribal past and white present but when he does find his mother coughing miserably, walking bent backed along the road, he withdraws and opts for the white present. This kind of characterization may give the feeling of complicity<sup>5</sup> of Alexie's discourse (and Native American discourse in general) with the white discourse which has criminally white-washed the whole tribal native past, present and identity. It is not complicity but realistic acceptance of the inevitable white socio-cultural surroundings inescapable for the natives. Corliss is the other side of the coin: Atwater withdraws to his white identity; Corliss arises from total immersion into Euro-American institutionalized academic context, searches for and finds Atwater and infuses into him true Indianness. The medium also has its own logic and compulsions as poetry may afford greater passion, *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* present more challenging subjectivity of the Native Americans. For example, the subject (buffalo) in *The Summer of Black Widows* can stare back into the eyes of the white visitors with fixity strong enough to disturb their gaze. On the contrary, prose has to work with a relatively greater tilt towards "realism" and has to be more analytic. Hence the subject that emerges from *Ten Little Indians*, *Flight*, and *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is more conscious of the contemporary context and need for adjustment. For example in these fictional works, when the characters "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" to construct their Native identity, they live and work and do it in the white institutions, interacting under a double compulsion: adjustment in the all pervasive Euro-American socio-cultural governmentality<sup>6</sup> and bio-force<sup>7</sup> in Foucauldian sense, and assertion of their tribal identity. The former is inevitable and established through centuries of physical and epistemic/discursive violence; it is the latter that has to change, harmonize and adjust itself. Hence the subject in Alexie's

prose works is not less Indian nor indirectly supporting white claims and motives; the Native American subject, is rather all the more realistic in finding a new shape and place for it spontaneous Nativity in the Euro-American context. Kent remarks:

While the Middle Passage served as the overt government-sanctioned project to separate Africans brought to the Americas from their culture and past, the Dawes Act<sup>8</sup> and the boarding schools served as the overt government-funded effort to dislocate Native Americans from their homelands and cultures. (p. 76)

Kent has referred to the two white institutions – academic and constitutional – that have contributed to the destruction of the Native culture. Otherwise it has been the entire Euro-American discursive life including fictional, literary, cartoons, advertisement, army, academic and constitutional reforms and treaties that have been marginalizing and suppressing the Natives for the last five centuries. It is this context that necessitates the reconstruction of the identity of Native Americans through their interaction with their white and Native counterparts. In February 1973, the leaders of American Indian Movement (AIM)<sup>9</sup> and the Oglalas captured many buildings near the original sight of Wounded Knee Massacre<sup>10</sup> and held off armed American Marshals and law enforcing agencies for seventy one days. Joseph M. Marshall tells us of the significance of Wounded Knee II as an international event since it demonstrated “the courage and commitment that Indian men and women could bring to a cause, to the point of dying if necessary to bring about a positive change for their people” (p. 699). Lundquist (2004) observes that out of 800 treaties between Federal government agencies and tribal societies, 400 were ratified by the American government although very few of these were honored. “Such neglect led to land loss, disgraceful legal treatment as well as loss of hunting and fishing rights; educational opportunities; passable health care; and mere survival provisions for thousands of people” (p. 286).

Geertz says that any utterance, oral or written, has meaning “only if and when it communicates a who and what” (2011, p. 30). By who he means a “*socially situated identity*, ‘the kind of person’ one is seeking to be and enact here and now” (p. 30). The identity of a “real Indian,” an insiders’ term, involves “appropriate accompanying objects (props), times and places” (32).<sup>8</sup> Powwow, ghost dance and basket ball, eagle feathers, buffalo, sun dance – to name a few – are significant Native American cultural activities. The woman traditional dancer has such beads on her dress as “affect the weather” (p. 17). The male traditional dancer has such feathers “as will not fall.” The children also participate as dancers. Even for

them it is not mere practice (rehearsal); rather it is a discursive cultural practice in which all the members of the tribe participate in the performative ritual that demonstrates the conviction in an ideal future as well as attachment with the past.

Archive is a “system of enunciability” (Mills, p. 29) and “cannot be described in its entirety” (ibid., p. 130) and Alexie’s poetry through various poems formulates some possible poetic situations to cover maximum socio-cultural dimensions of Native American archive. Alexie’s discourse presents through literary narratives the practices shared by the Native American community as they demonstrate and evoke inter-discursive connections with political maneuverings, cultural values, religion and White discourses. His poetry serves the purpose of consciousness-raising “necessary to realize the liberation of North America from the grip of its Nazi heritage” (Jaimes, p. 9). It creates knowledge from the Native perspectives, the knowledge that is power and the power that is the only source of social transformation. In his poetry, Alexie poses a clearer challenge to Euro-Americanism because here he is not “bogged down in the euphemistic academic sterility that has plagued so much literature about the native people of this hemisphere” (ibid., p. 10). The entire collection of American cultural, academic, judicial and media discourses have been contributing to the construction of the truth that suits the capitalistic agenda of the United States at the cost of the life, culture, property and resources of Native Americans (Deloria, 1997; Jaimes, 1992; Kent, 2007). The purpose of the reiterated discursive assertions of the cultural pretensions of legitimacy was “natural dominance” in North America entailing the Rights of Conquest and the Doctrine of Discovery which, according to Locke’s philosophy of Natural Law, is

that any Christian (European) happening upon “waste land” – most particularly land that was vacant or virtually vacant of human inhabitants –not only has a “natural right,” but indeed an obligation to put such land to “productive use.” Having assumed thus performed “God’s will” by “cultivating” and thereby “conquering” the former wilderness,” its discoverer can be said to “own” it. (Jaimes, p. 28)

Along with this philosophical rationale of subjugation, juridical discourse also played its role in the construction of legitimacy of exploitation of Native lands and resources: John Marshall, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court observed in the case of Johnson v. M’Intosh that the U.S. holds “inherent and preeminent rights” over Indian lands and it has ever been “*moral and legal basis*[emphasis added]for American territorial

existence" (Jaimes, p. 28). The limits of reactivation are one of the most relevant rules of archive, concerned with retaining, valuing, import and reconstitution of older discourse(s). The cars standing on the road, in "Grandmother, Porcupine, Traffic" in *The Summer of Black Widows*, Porcupine, thus, are representation of the modern, white, technological capitalist discourse which is countered by Grandmother who goes out on the road, in the middle of traffic, to bring away the dead porcupine. The dead porcupine has two connotations: first, it is the older discourse reactivated by Grandma; secondly, it is dead and bound to be discarded. Natives live in a horizontal relationship with Nature but the whites have a vertical relationship with Nature. In the latter case, domination is the only desirable response to Nature. Cars, therefore, ran over the porcupine and crushed it. The Grandmother, in the poem, rejuvenates the older discourse: horizontality is suggested by the Grandmother and the porcupine both being on the road, and if the porcupine is dead, the Grandmother, by implication of the weight of years, is a soon-going-to-die value. It is partial reactivation of the older discourse because the subject is conscious as much of the older discourse as of the older one.

Epistemological resources constitute collective mental archives and define the limits of the sayable in a given discursive space. Native American literature through its counter-discourse reconstitutes the mental archive wherein the Native subject performs its activities within its own culturally specific significance of things and systems of signs and knowledge. Native American character, however, is subject to the dual responsibility of loyalty towards the existing traditions and the grandparental attachment. The issue of subjectivity is not a simple reversion to the past for Sherman Alexie: the Native American subject has to adjust itself in the globalized westernized Euro-American socio-cultural scenario that compels him to come up to the standards and requirements of modern civilization. The subject that emerges out of Alexie's fictional work – *Ten Little Indians*, *Flight* and *Diary*– is more conscious of the modern realities and keeps hanging between the old and the new identities.

The Native American subject that emerges out of *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* is proud of its identity as an Indian, not complicit with the theoretical representations and practices of the Euro-American ideology. It is strongly subversive and challenging. It expresses adequate consciousness of the communal context and the need to preserve it with a sense of pride and respect. Therefore, even the narrative of individual first person singular repeatedly shifts towards the larger perspective of American history to encompass the five centuries of atrocities and suppression since Columbus, at times going back to pre-Columbian era helps assert cultural richness and diversity.

In "A Twelve-Step Treatment Program" in *First Indian on the Moon*, the protagonist meets an Indian college fellow who tells him that his degree is in danger and he has to complete his semester in two weeks. The advisors have sent him a letter saying: ". . . discard your cultural baggage and concentrate on the future" (1993, p. 33). This cultural baggage is "his braids dragging on the floor" (p. 33). The letter shows Euro-American institutionalized favor for the white culture in conflict with the Indian culture which can be exercised only at the cost of the future. Education is an activity in Paul James Gee's sense but it also involves cutting off the braids as these are unwanted cultural baggage.

The Indian subject that emerges out of Alexie's works is not evasive towards history or towards its temperamental problems like heavy drinking and Judas Complex, the desire to betray one's friends and relatives. The subject constructed here admits its drinking hamartia but finds different reasons from those offered by whites: The whites present it as an expression of the Indian self-destructive inevitability but the student in "A Twelve-Step Treatment Program" puts it as: ". . . maybe all of us Indians don't drink so much because we're Indians. Maybe we drink so much because all of you are so white" (p. 33). This is an indirect reminder to the whites and how they have historically planted alcohol amongst them.

Alexie's discourse re-situates and re-contextualizes the set of inter-subjective relationships between and among Native and white communities to address the issue of power imbalance. Here the subject undergoes anguish and suffering but its humor and power of imagination enable it to endure the trauma and preserve its identity. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a well-known character in *Smoke Signals*, *Reservation Blues*, and *The Lone Ranger*, uses story-telling as a strategy to connect the present with the past and the future. He revitalizes the traditional cultural forms, mixes laughter with tragedy and refuses to yield to suppressive forces. The subject has to live on the reservation, bear the problems of disease-carrying blankets, drinking, the issue of survival, burning of houses and institutional alienation. But he is able to laugh amidst the dismal life of the reservation and the crises of community, identity and self to make the agony bearable.

*Ten Little Indians* (2003), *Flight* (2007) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* (2007) offer solutions to the nihilist vision presented in *Indian Killer* (1996) where the subject is entangled in historical trauma, colonization, alcoholism and racism while the optimistic subject in *Flight* and *Diary* realizes the need for healing the traumatic inheritance of colonialism and genocide. Forgiveness, compassion and empathy emerge as a solution to the imbroglio of agony and suffering.

Sherman Alexie places Native Americans in a literary context with their own cultural signification and social practices, activities and relations. If culture imposes various practices on subject, a literary discourse may impose a very different set of practices on the individual to make him the subject in a new and transgressive way. The subject in *Flight* demonstrates gradual movement from his soul wound, anger and frustration at the colonial ravages against Indian culture and race, spanning centuries, to the recovery and healing of the soul wound's growing ability to merge into the Euro-American culture. The first phase finds expression in facial deformity as the very name of the protagonist, Zits, shows because of the uncountable zits on his face. Like Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*, Zits' physical deformity is a metaphor of socio-economic compulsions and cultural deprivations. He dismisses everyone and everything with "whatever!" – a protective shield against fusion into society, an expression of general indifference. He has lived in twenty foster-homes and attended twenty two schools because he is rootless: the father from whom he inherited his ugly bodily features left him in his childhood, while from his mother, an Irish woman, he inherited his green eyes. He never got respect from members of his own community who were in a relatively better social position: the educated and well-to-do Indians consider the drunkard Indian "a racist cartoon . . . a ghost in a ghost story" (Alexie, 2007, p. 7). Out of twenty foster-parents, two were Indian and they provided greater disillusionment.

The recovery of the soul wound of Zits becomes possible, ironically, through his interaction with a white character who introduces him to western thought. Resultantly, Zits gradually comes out of his narrow frustrated sphere and assimilates into the richness of Euro-American thought. This subject is different from that of the *First Indian on Moon* and *The Summer of Black Widows* grumbling about the blankets bearing small-pox germs, that he had been fishing there for 15000 years before the arrival of the white man, and that the eagle came much earlier than Columbus to the so-called "newly discovered" land. Of course this is not meaningless babbling; it is very significant in asserting the roots of the Indian subject in its own culture and tradition and to interpret history from the Native perspectives. Without this realization, Indian identity is an unrealizable dream. But this subject is unable to coexist with the whites in US and its wounds would never have healed and it would never have been prepared to live in the multi-cultural modern environment: recovery and healing become possible only in *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*.

The Indian woman in Alexie's poetry and fiction is also a challenge to the construction of the Indian woman as exotic, uncivilized and naked as

stated by Columbus in his letters to the Spanish king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella (Zinn, 1980) and as the picture book by Curtis implies (1972). Corliss, the protagonist of "The Search Engine" in *Ten Little Indians*, for instance, studies Euro-American literature in a Euro-American university but she sets off in quest of Harlan Atwater who is the embodiment of her traditional Indian identity. In *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon*, Indian women of various ages and contexts are presented, from a small girl to the old grandmother who is trying to pick up the dead body of a porcupine, from young girls at the powwow dance to the girls on the reservation who have lost their beauty and youth in drinking and gambling, from a dying mother ignored by a son well-adjusted in the Euro-American capitalist culture to a young mother who can put the whole hospital into ecstasy by an Indian song sung to her dying newborn son. The hospital is one of the normative bases of the society in which the doctor-judge is appointed to maintain surveillance of the subjects (patients). In spite of all this the machinery of observation and supervision is flouted to assert the deviant mode of treatment-cum-entertainment. All these are authentic images of women who are living and dying, enjoying and pining, celebrating and suffering in the real Euro-American world, on the powwow dance ground, on the reservation, in the family life, in love and hatred, in various natural human ambitions. Alexie's literary discourse does not make them exotic and primitive under the guise of paternal discourse; but presents them as they are, as the flesh and blood figures of day-to-day existence living their life in misery and joy, not as artifacts to be preserved through pictures and popular literature before they vanish.

Arnold Krupat says that "sovereignty is the result of complex negotiations and encounters between cultural practices and the practices, impossible to circumvent or ignore, of Euro-American cultures" (p. 16). The protagonists of *Flight* and *Diary* are conscious of the complex negotiations between traditional Native culture and contemporary Euro-American culture. Zits admits the goodness and nobility of the white doctors and nurses who saved him despite his being a murderer of many innocent men and women. Alexie has re-constructed the subject and its situation and placement in the world not only to understand the socio-political reality of the world but to change it.

One implication of *Flight* is that one is what one is because of the body one lives in. This body places the subject in a particular socio-political and cultural and ethnic context and one cannot help behaving accordingly. This is the Foucauldian sense of discursive determinism of the subject. When Zits is in his Native American body he thinks differently than when he is in a Euro-American body. As he has received only hatred, indifference and violence, he learns from Justice that violence is the right response to

violence. He therefore goes to the bank and shoots people blindly, not caring who gets hit and who escapes, calling it his Ghost Dance in the hope that it will help to throw away all the whites from wherever they have come to occupy Indian land.

Arnold Krupat as a non-Native critic states the risk: "The danger I run as an ethnocritic is the danger of leaving the Indian silent entirely in my discourse" (Ethnocriticism, p. 30) and this risk mars most Eurocentric discourse. The Native subject in Alexie challenges this risk and speaks candidly of living situations of socio-cultural life of America. Bateson argues that contact is not limited to contact between two different communities but it can also occur within one community. He "even extend(s) the idea of 'contact' so widely as to include those processes whereby a child is molded and trained to fit the culture into which he was born" (as cited in Sarris, p. 43). Alexie's subject experiences "contact" in both these senses. Corliss (*Ten Little Indians*), Zits (*Flight*), Arnold (*Diary*), the unnamed protagonists of *Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* speaking through first person singular pronoun "I," are all in multi-layered relationships with the tribal members as well as the members of the white community and they consistently reach a fair balance rather than evading either form of contact or titling the balance on either side. The balance does not imply thoughtless equal proportion of both aspects of identity; they are assertively Native Americans adjusting themselves in the scenario of White control and domination.

Reservation, the land base of community, is a consistent motif in Alexie. Choice of reservation is an exclusionary and counter-strategy. Non-Native writers mostly refer to the pre-reservation era to essentialize the Native American subject in earlier, imaginary times and places and to ignore and blur the present-day reality of the Native American experience. Confining the Natives to the reservation was an exclusionary strategy, the white solution to the Indian problem, whereas Alexie's focus on this excluded place reverses the Euro-American position and strategy. The subject in *Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* experiences reservation life away from mainstream America. This is not resilient preference for circumstances contrary to "civilization," the reservation is the day-to-day Native American reality ignored or misrepresented by Euro-American fictional and media discourse. In the poem "After the First Lightning," the protagonist wants to weave his hair with the hair of his beloved on the mountain near the reservation. It is a counter-balancing imagined alternative to the white institutional de-formative oppression. In *Diary*, the subject feels confined in institutional subjection but gradually emerges from it through relationships with the

white companions through social interaction and academic interaction at school.

If the circle and the line are the metaphors of the Native and the white epistemologies respectively, Krupat believes that the lines and the circles “can meet only tangentially” but Alexie’s subject tends towards understanding and harmony even though it has to undergo transformational operations as in *Flight*, and zealous and successful effort at adjustment as in *Diary* and *Ten Little Indians*. Alexie makes use of Native myths like sun dance, powwow, salmon, eagle and coyote because he seems to second Paula Gunn Allen’s stance that “\*myth is a kind of a story that allows a holistic image to pervade and shape consciousness, thus providing a coherent and empowering matrix for action and relationship” (pp. 104-105). Alexie never isolates the mythic expression from contemporary white discursive reality: the eagle’s presence questions Columbus and the consequences of his arrival; the Ghost Dance is performed in the bank with a pistol killing innocent people and questioning both the Euro-American history of violence, the mythic function of the Ghost Dance (*Flight*), and/or ascertaining the powwow (*What You Pawn, I Shall Redeem*). However, even this ascertaining does not take place in isolation, the protagonist finds his grandmother’s powwow regalia in a pawnbroker’s shop and authenticates it to be his grandmother’s from the bead sown into it. The recovery involves police, newspapers, McDonaldization, the whole of the Eurocentric institutional context of America in opposition with Native American values, ethos and problems. When the regalia is recovered, the protagonist performs the powwow dance on the road, blocking the traffic and the protagonist of *First Indian on the Moon* claims that towards the end of the world powwows would be performed throughout the world for forgiveness, not for revenge.

The subject that emerges out of *Flight* and *Diary* is simultaneously conscious of and attuned to the dialogic cultural exchange. Hybridized dialogic discourse of these works is a meditational strategy that bridges two conflicting worldviews. As cross-cultural encounter is a pre-condition of Native American literature, Alexie’s construction of interfusional subject is acceptance of an unavoidable truth. The environment in which Alexie’s subject breathes finds its cohesion and unity in the inevitable blending of Native and white discursive patterns. Louis Owens and Greg Sarris in *Mixed blood Messages* and *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* respectively favor multigeneric, hybridized discursivity of cross-cultural nature (Pulitano, p. 14). Instead of staying in the margins and blaming the centre for the marginalizing tendency, Alexie’s discourse in *Flight* and *Diary*, in keeping with Owens and Sarris’ critical stance, places the subject in the network of intercultural life to redefine the new sense of Native identity. The poly-

vocality of Alexie's discourse challenges the Euro-American authoritative essentializing construction of the Native American subject. The positioning of the subject in the cross-cultural situation is what Vizenor calls "the hermeneutics of survivance" (1994, p. 68). Similarly, Paula GunnAllen's discourse with its separatist stance about female-centered worldview tries to find a separatist solution but proves problematic because it legitimizes the Eurocentric binaries. Alexie's woman, on the contrary, actively participates in the white institutional, socio-cultural and academic life and emerges as a subject rooted in traditional Native American identity as well as conscious of contemporary demands. The parents in *Do Not Go Gentle* are in a hospital, a Euro-American institution, westernized in its sign system and knowledge and practices but the woman with her husband transcends the institutional constraints and disrupts the whole suppressive scientific episteme by playing upon a drum with a dildo, thus asserting the arbitrariness of the culturally enforced patterns. Despite everything, it is within the hospital with its artificially pulsating paraphernalia, that the child gets treatment. The mother, however, connects the recovery of the child with the Native American music, not with the Euro-American medicine. New connections are developed inside the white context, not out of it. Alexie's subject does not find any separatist solution to its predicament; it places itself in the thick context of the metropolitan centre and asserts a bridged subjectivity in the contact zone. Corliss, Zits (*Flight*) and Arnold (*Diary*) are good examples of the interfusional subject, functional simultaneously in both white and Native American worlds and worldviews. Corliss' fascination for Hopkins is counter-balanced by her uncles' satiric dismissal of Hopkins as a nonsensical poet and a hypocrite; her intercourse with Atwater also serves the same function: retrieval of her roots in the white context. Eysturoy says that the function of the Native American discourse is "to get back our origins . . . remembering the past and putting it back together, recovering, knowing who we are and who we have been" (p. 100). Alexie's concern for going back to the roots finds expression in *Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on Moon*, whereas in *Flight*, *Diary* and *Ten Little Indians* he is concerned with going forward to the contemporary world but, of course, not at the cost of the past. The arc of intellectual insight and cultural critique from poetry to fiction is from insistence upon roots to realistic acceptance of the Euro-American institutional reality. Both observations, however, need to be qualified: insistence on roots does not mean that the subject is unmindful to the contemporary reality even as going forward does not mean that it is indifferent to the traditional identity and communitism<sup>11</sup> that is the spirit of the Native American mode of life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Subject: Subjectivity and identity are roughly synonymous but they carry different connotations. Identity consists in one's beliefs and specific characteristic traits that define one's consistent personality. Subjectivity on the other hand implies a degree of self awareness of identity despite unavoidable constraints on one's ability for complete comprehension of identity. Subjectivity involves critical consideration of the issue of the origin and the process of the formation of identity, its intelligibility and the extent of human control on it.

<sup>2</sup>Ontology is the science of being that deals with such issues as the nature of existence and the structure of reality.

<sup>3</sup>Agency: The issue of agency is "the question of who or what acts oppositionally, when ideology or discourse or psychic processes . . . construct human subjects" (Ashcroft et al., 55).

<sup>4</sup>Crazy Horse, Oglala Sioux, and one of the most iconic Native American tribal leaders, fought against the US government's encroachments on Native territories and culture. He was murdered but even dying; he refused to lie on the white man's cot and insisted on lying on the floor, thus remaining true to his Indian identity.

<sup>5</sup>Complicity of Alexie's discourse: Atwater in "The Search Engine" is in a hybrid relationship with his tribal past and white present but when he finds his mother coughing, he withdraws and opts for the white present. This kind of characterization may give the feeling of complicity of Alexie's discourse (and the Native American discourse in general) with the white discourse which has criminally characterized the entire Native American tribal past and present identity. But it is, I believe, realistic acceptance of the inevitable white socio-cultural milieu that is inescapable for Native Americans.

<sup>6</sup>Governmentality: Foucault's concept of governmentality has a complex relationship between men and things, and is concerned with multi-dimensional socio-economic human relationships involving territory, means of living, resources and wealth. Secondly, these relations involve cultural interaction, habits and customs. Thirdly, these include human relationship with "the accidents and misfortunes of social existence" (Foucault, 1991, p. 93). His concept of government involves who governs, who is governed and how someone else's activities are shaped (Mills, 2003, p. 47).

<sup>7</sup>Bioforce/Bio-power and governmentality are inter-related. Foucault defines it as the "increasing organization of population and welfare for the sake of increased force and productivity" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, p. 8). It is increasing "subjugation of bodies and ... control of populations" (Foucault, p. 140) for the generation of greater productivity, utility and efficiency through governmentality and pastoral power.

<sup>8</sup>The Dawes Severalty Act: American Congress passed Dawes Severalty Act in 1887 awarding the US citizenship to the Indians who renounced tribal allegiance granting them 160 acres of reservation land under certain conditions. Unprepared for life off the reservation, Indians leased their lands to white settlers for a few cents an acre and by 1906 about 60% of reservation lands were in white hands. Burke Act was passed in 1887 to make amends for the problems of Dawes Severalty Act and to encourage homesteading by Indians and protect their

holdings, but its provisions for close supervision of Indian life were resented and soon proved self-defeating. The Burke Act was significantly amended in 1924, when all Indians were granted citizenship. The Wheeler-Howard Act was passed in 1934. It returned to tribal ownership surplus lands previously open to public sale.

<sup>9</sup>AIM: The American Indian Movement is a Native American advocacy group in the United States, founded in July 1968 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. AIM was initially constituted to address American Indian sovereignty, treaty issues, spirituality, and leadership, while simultaneously addressing incidents of police harassment and racism that forced Native Americans to move off to reservations and give up their tribal culture.

<sup>10</sup>Wounded Knee Massacre(1890) occurred on December 29, 1890,near Wounded Knee Creek on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the U.S. state of South Dakota. By the time it was over, more than 200 men, women, and children of the Lakota had been killed and 51 were wounded (4 men, 47 women and children, some of whom died later); some estimates placed the number of dead at 300. Twenty-five soldiers also died, and 39 were wounded (6 of the wounded died later).

<sup>11</sup>Communitism: In *That the People Might Live: Native American and Community and Native American Community* (1997), Jace Weaver observes that the single thing that most defines American Indian literatures relates to a sense of community and commitment to it. He terms this phenomenon “communitism” which blends the words community and activism.

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