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**Contemporary Native American
Self-fashioning Narratives:
Sherman Alexie's Fiction**

Abstract

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Key-words

Native American, film, (mis)representation, stereotype, identity, dominant discourse, survivance, gender, storytelling, authenticity, appropriation, assimilation, tradition, commodification, ethnic reconciliation, mixed-blood, humor

Abstract

The contemporary multicultural model in the United States affirms, reassesses and gives ethnic minorities the opportunity to gain their proper place in the American mainstream culture. The dynamics and the structure of the American literature have changed, so it can be said that there is no longer a single, unitary ideology and direction in literature. Rather, there are several literatures which are emerging according to different perspectives that range from the ethnic minority to the gender minority perspective, both of them being sometimes included in the same narrative. Thus, the previously marginalized minorities (according to ethnicity, gender, etc.), gain access to the cultural center and have the opportunity to make their voice heard, as opposed to the previous silencing and misrepresentation.

In this context, the aim of the thesis entitled *Contemporary Native American Self-fashioning Narratives: Sherman Alexie's Fiction*

is to assess the works of contemporary Native American writer Sherman Alexie by employing several theoretical approaches: postcolonial studies, as well as cultural studies (ethnic studies and film studies) in order to offer a comprehensive analysis of his texts, on the one hand, and to position his writing in the social and cultural milieu from which it originates, on the other hand. Sherman Alexie's texts are self-fashioning narratives which subvert and revise the misrepresentations of Native Americans which permeate American literature and film, repositioning Indianness in the twenty-first polycultural America.

In order to assess Alexie's texts, an examination of the misrepresentations of Native Americans in the American culture is imperative. Therefore, the first chapter, entitled *(Mis)Representations of Native Americans in the Dominant Discourse* focuses on the diachronic analysis of the representations of Indianness in literature and film. Representations of Native

Americans have been constantly distorted in the Euro-American discourse since the first accounts of the European explorers up to latest Hollywood blockbusters. As critics suggested, the tendency to fictionalize and stereotypy the delineations of the indigenous peoples in the written texts and, subsequently, in motion pictures, stemmed from the need of the dominant discourse to justify past and present actions against the native population. Thus, the imaginary Indian gradually gained prominence over accurate accounts of native people or over self-representations. Consequently, the Euro-American discourse managed to carve a certain representation of the natives in the collective consciousness that influenced both the non-native and the native communities.

The misrepresentations of the Indian in the mainstream discourse were encapsulated in three main stereotypes: the Noble Savage, the Ignoble Savage and the Vanishing Indian. The idea of Noble Savage embodied the principle that “good” Indians were in a mutually beneficial

relationship with the whites. Originating in the French Enlightenment, they were pure beings living in harmony with nature, untouched by the evils of civilization. “Bad” Indians, the bloodthirsty godless drunken savages legitimized conquest and genocide, since they embodied undesirable elements in the emergent new nation. The Vanishing Indian doctrine dooms the Indian to disappearance as the Euro-American civilization conquered and tamed the continent, subsequently negating indigenous land rights and silencing native voices. The Indian as delineated in the mainstream narratives is an entirely white invention.

The second chapter, *Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie’s Writing – White Prescriptions on Red Bodies*, focuses mostly on the effects of colonization on Native American individuals and communities, as well as on their representation in the dominant discourse narratives, as reflected in Sherman Alexie’s novels *Indian Killer* and *Reservation Blues*. The

Native American writer considers that there is an on-going process of colonization in the American contemporary society to which the Native American individuals and communities are constantly subjected. Alexie's view is transparent in most of his fiction and films but, since both *Indian Killer* and *Reservation Blues* expose in a more virulent manner the mainstream society continual subjugation and assimilation of the Native American peoples, the analysis of the two novels focuses on issues such as assimilation, ethnic appropriation, ethnic authenticity, and commodification.

By drawing on the theoretical groundbreaking work of Gerald Vizenor on "Postindian narratives of survivance", the third chapter, *Counter-narratives – Revision and Subversion of Mainstream Narratives in Sherman Alexie's Short Stories*, focuses on the analysis of Sherman Alexie's strategies for actively subverting and revising stereotypical representations of Indianness in order to reinscribe them within the

mainstream discourse as new narratives of self-representation, as reflected in the short story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Toughest Indian in the World*, as well as in his films *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing*. Sherman Alexie's short stories and films deconstruct the simulations of Indianness perpetuated in the mainstream narratives, and replace these false representations with genuine self-representations of Indianness.

Alexie's characters become Postindian warriors of survivance whose narratives can be seen as counter-narratives to the narratives about Indians which are disseminated in the mainstream American culture. These new types of warriors co-exist in an in-between space that allows them to have a more articulate perspective on both worlds, a space that provides them with the tools that can make them saviors. By programmatically subverting and rewriting conquest narratives that ideologically position

them as the absolute Other, Sherman Alexie's Postindian warriors of survivance symbolically reposition themselves and their community within the master narrative.

The fourth chapter, entitled *Repositioning Indianness in the Context of Interethnic Reconciliation*, examines Sherman Alexie's subtle ideological shift in repositioning Indianness in the context of interethnic reconciliation after the tragedy that shocked America after the 9/11 catastrophic events. Alexie's short story collections *Ten Little Indians* and *War Dances*, as well as his novels *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, while still exposing the racial and social injustice perpetuated in the multicultural United States, also advocate for reconciliation and communication. The characters in these short stories and novels are constantly renegotiating their identities in the multicultural urban space (another significant shift is that the fictional space of the reservation is replaced by the big

city). Ceremonies are also adapted according to variables such as race, culture, gender or sexuality.

The last chapter, *Mechanisms and Functions of Humor in Sherman Alexie's Texts*, initially overviews different theoretical approaches to humor, approaches which overlap and complement each other when analyzing Sherman Alexie's texts in order to later explore techniques and functions of humor employed by the native writer in his texts. Although there are similarities between the functions of humor in the Euro-American texts and the texts written by the Native American writers in the last few decades, there are also differences that originate in the dissimilar views on the world of the two cultures. Thus, Sherman Alexie employs humor to mediate the message in a form that is accessible and acceptable for the white readers, while concomitantly deconstructing stereotypical representation through laughter.

What Sherman Alexie ultimately accomplishes through his writing is to prove that Natives Americans have not vanished yet, that they are still strong and willing to reclaim the right to represent themselves, as well as to be allowed to evolve as any other ethnic minority in the complicated and complex American cultural context at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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