



SYSTEMIC SUFFERING AND POLITICALLY AMBIGUOUS RESPONSE: SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION BLUES

SATHEESH K.V

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College, Thripunithura, Ernakulam, Kerala

Email: getsatishindiana@gmail.com.



Article Received:02/10/2020

Article Accepted: 01/11/2020

Published online:08/11/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.90](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.90)

Abstract

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* is a political novel that engages with the theme of Native American resistance to centuries of cultural domination and systemic oppression. Alexie brings together in the novel several discourses with regard to the identity and socio-political survival of the Indian people and follows the path of post 1960s Native American writers. The difference is that his writing subverts the idea of nobly suffering Indian and presents the harsh reality of Indian life in the reservations and the absurdity of their resistance in the face of structurally curated domination. The novel is politically ambiguous as it tells the story of a few Indians whose struggle for redemption meets with utter failure. He problematizes the tendency among Indians not having the political will to critically engage with their troubled past and stereotypical representations of Indians in the popular culture. Alexie blends in elements of fantasy in the novel in order to let past speak through the characters and therefore can be interpreted as an ethnic text that uses tribal memory as a means to negotiate the present. Blending of various cultural aspects makes the novel a postmodern one. The text negotiates between traditional Native American values and dominant western values but does not chart a way forward for the political impasse enabled structurally by socio-cultural forces.

Keywords: Native American resistance, postmodernism, ambiguity, hybridity, trans-culturalism, cultural erasure, popular culture, biopower, cultural domination, imperialism, magical realism, ethnic text,

The sufferings of Native Americans are systemically enabled and structurally curated by various socio-cultural forces set to action during centuries of colonial oppression, displacement and cultural erasure. Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* addresses issues of lack of political rights, threats to economic survival, declining life expectancy caused by wide-spread alcoholism, and the negotiation of complex identities of the Indians in opposition with both the Indian stereotypes in popular culture and the dominant American identity. It's a political novel that analyses the past in connection with the present

of Native Americans, whose predicament has the historical context of centuries of colonial contact and cultural invasion beginning with the arrival of Columbus in the American continent. The slow but systemic destruction of life and culture that followed is unparalleled in the history of mankind. The surviving generations of Native Americans had to carry with the trauma of the troubled history of the past. The Indian struggle is two-pronged, each in opposition with each other: one is a fight for acceptance that manifest itself in their struggle for political and economic power and the second is one

related to the issue of identity. Alexi maps out the Indian sensibility in Spokane reservation despairing at the lack of opportunities and struggling still with the after-effects of centuries of colonial oppression, with future in sight seeking a compromise with the past that would enable them to negotiate the present. This paper offers a critical evaluation of the novel enquiring into the nature of Alexi's political vision and the ambiguous nature of the conclusion of the novel.

Reservation Blues tries to come to terms with politically relevant issues faced by the community in the larger American society with regard to identity and economic mobility. It charts the rise and fall of a music band, metaphorically a vehicle for the liberation of Native Americans from their troubled identity and cultural conundrum. An Indian reservation near Spokane reservation becomes the setting for several Native Americans who start a music band with soaring ambitions of popularity, wealth and freedom. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a reservation outcast stumble upon Robert Johnson and his magical guitar. He, spurred by the demonic magic of Robert and his guitar, along with a few other Native Americans, decides to form a blues band which they name "Coyote Springs". The story portrays systemic suffering of Indians, the subtle ways in which power equations prevalent in the society affect these people and how defenseless they are against the micro level operations of power. For Foucault, power is distributed throughout social relations and is not to be reduced to centralized economic forms and determinations. Power is woven into the fabric of the entire social order and culture. It is widely dissipated and operates deviously through cultural myths, discourses, and individual practices. Power is not something that simply represses but also brings subjects into being. It has a regulatory dimension as well – discourses regulate the bodies and behaviour of subjects and the subjects participates in the very same discourses that control them. The operations of power are thus dynamic. Foucault uses the term 'biopower' to refer to this dynamic power exerted over populations. The novel examines the way in which myths perpetuated by mass media works as a means of social control and how the Native Americans participate in the very

same discourses that regulate and drain their political power.

The novel begins with an African-American singer, Robert Johnson, an utter stranger to the reservation, ostensibly lost his way, appears in the place and nobody dares to talk to him except Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Robert fears that he is being chased by a gentleman, who is mysterious but dangerous. Thomas gives Robert a ride to the base of Wellpinit Mountain, where Robert could see *Big Mom* who could be his savior, and asks him to journey the rest of the way by himself. This is the occasion in which Robert's guitar comes into the possession of Thomas. It seems that the guitar has magical powers. Victor Joseph and his best friend Junior Polatkin, appear on the place. They are trouble makers and after an episode of violent confrontation, which results in the destruction of the guitar they part ways, leave the place. Thomas discovers that the guitar is in perfect shape and even starts talking to him urging him to start a music band for the liberation of his community. A touch of magical realism lights up the narration in the beginning of the story. The story introduces us to an altered reality with the employment of magical elements, a talking guitar and its incredible playing power connects the living with the dead. The reference here is to the cultural memory of Native Americans lost due to centuries of colonial oppression and forced displacement. Land and culture are parts of one continuum for the native tribes. With lose of land, the location where their past is located, the connection with the spirits of ancestors are lost forever. The native culture is irrevocably lost, music symbolizes the recuperation of the lost past; at least its emotional content. The magical guitar and music that comes forth from it promises a lot and we feel that Alexi is going to tell the story of the redemption of native tribes from centuries of alienation. But what ensues is a different story in which the Native Americans face systemic cultural and social forces which prove too difficult to negotiate. The struggle that ensues with both the inside and the outside is suggestive of a deeper malady a modern society like America, which pride itself as the citadel of democratic values, is caught up with.

The band formed initially draw small crowds from tribe members and their fame grows among their own people and far away native communities. Despite initial setbacks, they make a name for themselves, the highlight being a triumphant redemptive second show at the same bar where they initially were booed. Their songs of hope and resurgence strike a chord with the people which accounts for their popularity. Initial setbacks, then success and later failure to negotiate wider cultural forces summarizes the saga of these people whose aspiration for glory could not be fulfilled more because of the lack of systemic support than the failings of the individuals to negotiate their own selves.

The novel could be analysed on the surface as a coming-of-age story of young people who struggle to find their place in life seeking wealth, progress and acceptance. They also enjoy life exhibiting the innate desire for fun and frolic common among young people. But what kind of identity they want to establish is what Alexi problematizes in this novel. For them growth means blending with the mainstream of American society but at the same time the Indian identity is something that they have to negotiate and come to terms with. The central character of the story is Thomas Builds-the-Fire and the story is about the band to which Thomas is the leader. Thomas writes the songs, Victor Joseph, plays the magical guitar and Junior Polatkin is on the drums. They are joined later by Chess and Checkers Warm Water taking charge of Keyboard and singing. The band was invited to audition in New York, something that they had only in the wildest of dreams. The contract they signed was for an amount they never even dreamt of. The magical guitar that guided them toward the path of music refuses to cooperate and the success and fame vanished as quickly as it was gained. The novel symbolizes the disparity between what the society promises and what the artist attempts to achieve. When they write the first song the disparity surfaces in the form of popular culture in which the Indians are caricatures. What comes to Thomas's mind is the innumerable stereotypes about the Indians reproduced incessantly in mass culture through the medium of television in particular. The dilemma is whether to listen to the soul or to cater to the

perceptions of the general public curated by popular culture flooded with countless distorted representations of Indians. The malfunction of the magical guitar becomes a metaphor for the inner conflict of the Indian artist who feels deep inside both the rebelling Indian self and the practical mind that wants to compromise.

Thomas mixes musical styles and forms by blending both the American Indian life and the African American expression, a community whose travails are in a way qualitatively similar to the Native Americans: marred by displacement, lack of agency, rootlessness, trauma of the past, victims of colonization and European imperialism etc. Alexie thus suggests the way forward for the Native Americans: the need to concentrate on the present, solidarity among Indians, and joining hands with communities that face similar issues. Thomas is following the Big Mom, the mystical mother figure on the Spokane reservation who symbolizes the spirit of the land irrespective of differences. She is "a part of every tribe" (Alexie 199). This is where Alexie traverses a new path unlike his predecessors: he proposes that the way forward is an alliance among various Indian communities and communities like African Americans. Alexie makes a different pact with the past, in which past does not become the repository that the native Americans should look for sustenance and liberation; instead he wants past to be reconciled with the present, a past that opens up opportunities in the present even if that means negotiating cleverly the stereotypes and misrepresentations about the Indians in popular culture. This is the source of Alexie's ironical humour that you find in almost all his works. *Reservation Blues* combines past, present and future in a curious blend dispersing the narration with humour, comedy and pathos and even in failure there is a way forward. It stresses the need for individual action and responsibility. Behind the apparent dead end that the novel paints is the evocation of an alternate path; one that stresses the need for individual expediency, political pragmatism and practical solutions beneficial both to the community and the nation.

The novel is an ethnic text that uses tribal memory as a means for negotiating the present. Alexie makes use of dream fragments in many parts

of the novel and it can be interpreted as an employment of magical realism which one would find profusely in many postmodern writings especially in Latin American writings. The use of magical realism enables the writer to let past intrude into the consciousness of the characters fissuring the main narrative. All ethnic texts use similar strategies to narrate memory and include in the narrative suppressed history and subaltern sensibility (De Hay 44). Magical realism is not new to Native American sensibility. This is a Native American writing strategy that owes its existence to oral tradition. In ritual oral story telling the story teller renews the past upon each telling. Like all Native American writers Alexei also draws on this particularity of Native American story telling. Janine Richardson sums up the effect magical realism has in the story in his analysis:

in considering the background and content of magical realism, it seems unsurprising that Alexei finds it to be a congenial form, for the traditional novel is too static, exclusive, and reductive in its vision of reality to adequately relate Alexie's story of history- in-in-the-present, non-linear time, and cosmic cause-and-effect (47).

With the employment of magical realism Alexie could incorporate the past into the text. The story becomes mythic and historical at the same time. The mythical element 'coyote', the name of mythical Indian trickster figure, could have instilled power and meaning into their band. But Victor dissents the name, for him the name represents all that is Indian which tires him. Junior is also sickened by the name; he complains: "That's too damn Indian...It's always Coyote this, Coyote that. I'm sick of Coyote." (45). If only the gang had been politically enabled to grasp the significance of history the name would have enabled and empowered them, instead they perceive it as a source of shame.

Thomas improvises with the available resources at hand. Native cultural elements, African American element and popular culture become the tools for Thomas to experiment with. He blends various cultural practices and fashions a new sense of Indian identity. Gerald Vizenor in his book *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* comes

with the concept of "postindian" (4) which refers to a new Indian identity that got reconfigured with historical experience and looks forward rather than stuck in the past. The postindian creates new stories of "survivance over domination". According to Vizenor the postindian is "the sensation of new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representation of the invented Indian". (4) Thomas works in the ruins making use of available resources and engages with the "manifest manners of domination", the systemic forces in operation as a consequence of colonization and history. Thomas is responding to history, both the past and the 'living present' of history. For an Indian history is not dead facts about the past, history is what identity is all about. The past is something that they have to negotiate day in and day out, festers their present, gnaws into the depths of their selves. Thomas' attempt is not that of an individual responding to history, but in him comes together the experience of a community seeking political and social redemption from 'manifest destiny'. Thomas is making use of the new possibilities opened up by the new world order where communities and races from different parts of the globe could come together and share their historical experiences; mutually reinforce each other in their political struggle towards more political representation and social power. These possibilities are not realised in the novel though the novel suggests what George Lipstiz, an American studies scholar, describes in his work *Dangerous Crossroads*, where he discusses the cross cultural practices made possible by the new world order. He says that the movement of cultural aspects across the world in quick time has enabled the setting up of "new networks of identification and affiliation" (13).

Memory and history plays a significant role in the text. The long march of history has not ended for the Indians; it is a continuous saga that interferes with the experience of the present. History for the Indians is not something they can never settle with though Alexei shows a way forward through humour and irony, where history is treated with no reverence and myths about the Indians circulating in popular culture are neglected rather than seriously dealt with. Remembering and making sense of the past are crucial to the survival of the natives. Spokane reservation is the place of five generations of

ancestors. The reservation is a place where the natives there have psychic investment with the imagined spirit of the ancestors. Thomas tells stories referring to the ancestors but nobody wants to hear. Forgetting and denial of the past is also rampant among the younger generation in the reservation. Thomas' attempt to tell stories even in the face of neglect and humiliation is his rebellion against willful forgetting and denial of history. The tribal memory is repressed and Thomas' attempt to revive it meets with resistance within the community. What gains upper hand is the official version of history when tribal history is not told by the community. Janine Richardson writes: "when tribal memory is repressed, all that remains to reconstruct the past and one's identity is the dominant culture's official story as represented in historical monuments and markers" (41). The ultimate failure of the gang could be ascribed to the failings of the community rather than to individual incompetency. It is not the blues gang that fails; it is the failure of the community in keeping memory alive and fails in providing the crucial psychic support, thereby preempts the possibility of political resurgence. For Thomas cultural heritage is a key to the success of the gang. But it is not something that a few members of the tribe can politically activate; he needs the whole-hearted participation of the community to lay claim to cultural heritage and make it a politically charged tool for native resurgence. Thomas tries to remember his cultural heritage but "most Indians don't follow those rules anymore" (5). He is disappointed by his community, for his it is "as fragile as eggs, despite their warrior disguises" (16).

Dreams and visions are the major means through which Alexie connects the present with the past. Junior is always plagued by dreams and visions and becomes the sources of his decisions. Junior and Victor, "two of the most accomplished buddies of Native American History" (13) being influenced by the past through dreams and visions speaks poorly of the workings of memory. Memory proves to be a corrupt assistant as these visions and dreams do not bring anything constructive in their lives. While he is off job he spends his time drinking and indulges in 'aimless violence'. He experiences death and loss in his nightmares. In his vision on occasions he is an Indian warrior powerful enough to take on the might of U.S.

mounted troops only to be vanquished soon. He feels only sorrow and loss in his dreams which accounts for his eventual suicide. Victor is also unable to convert his dreams and visions into sources of political energy. The Indians in the reservations lacks the interpretative key to decipher the inner meanings of their visions and nightmares. Alexie cries out silently in the novel that if only the Indians had a centralizing energy that could gather their memories and dreams into a sustaining energy, focused and potent enough to turn them into politicized subjects. Such a force in the lives of Thomas, Victor and Junior would have given their lives power and meaning and the band would not have failed. The final episode of fleeing the reservation by Thomas, Checkers and Chess is 'rich' with ambivalence as it is not certain whether the story portrays hope or despair. The magical realist element of the 'fantastic horses' that accompany them could be analyzed as signifying the spirit of Indian culture and life. But at the same time their ultimate failure in politicizing the community or not being able to become sources of inspiration to the tribe indicates meaninglessness. The music is silenced by the community and any hope of community resurgence is nil. The novel ultimately portrays despair by criticizing Indians for being uncritical of pop culture creations and using the very same images to build their identities. Alexie's novel illustrates multiple hybridities by mixing various cultural elements and thus cancels out domination but at the same time the failure of band indicates that the systemic enabling of dominance and submission are prevalent and very much active.

Works cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *Reservation Blues*. New York, Open Road Integrated Media, 2013. Print.
- Cox, James. "Muting White Noise: The Subversion of popular Culture Narratives of Conquest in Sherman Alexie's Fiction." *Studies in American Literatures* 9.4 (1997):52-70.
- De Hay, Terry. "Narrating Memory". *Memory, Narrative, and Identity. New essays in Ethnic American Literatures*. Eds, Amritjit Singh,

Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert Hogan.
Boston: Northeastern P, 1994. 26-44

Ford, Douglas. "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues"
Melus 27.3 (2002): 197-215

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." In *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, edited by H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, 208-226. The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Krupat, Arnold. *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Print.

Lipsitz, George. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and Poetics of Place*. New York: Verso, 1994. Print.

Lundquist, Suzanne Evertsen. *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*. New York, Continuum Books, 2004. Print.

Richardson, Janine. "Magic and Memory in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*." *Studies in American Literatures*, Winter 1997, Series 2, Vol. 9, No. 4: pp. 39-51

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives of Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Print.
