



## Cultural Struggle in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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### Abstract

*Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie is a thriller which deals with cultural estrangement and search for self identity. The novel depicts how the Native American people were deprived of justice. As a result of rage and seeking vengeance for his people's violent history, a serial killer named 'Indian Killer' terrorizes Seattle, murdering and scalping the bodies of white men and leaves behind the bodies embellished with owl feathers. Due to the bloody scenario the whole city turns into a fearful state which had become racially brutal. John Smith, a Native American by birth, is the protagonist who is adopted and raised by a kind white couple and also is the prime suspect of the murders going around the city. John longs for his lost heritage and gradually struggles between the two cultures leading to his identity crisis. This paper deals with the issues of cultural imbalance in the Native American society.

*Key words: culture, self-identity, identity crisis, murder, vengeance.*

*Indian Killer* (1996) is a novel by Sherman Alexie which deals with the discrimination faced by the Native Americans (also known as Indians) in the mainland America. The novel revolves around the life of John Smith, who was a Native American by birth but was adopted by a white couple. There are several themes present in the novel like identity crisis, cultural differences, murder mystery, ethnic values, alcoholism and unemployment etc. to name a few. Here, the matter of cultural differences and struggles will be taken up mostly. John Smith is adopted into a loving and caring white family where he is happy and content. The problem occurs in his life when he grows older and sees that he is treated differently due to his skin colour. He was not light-skinned like his parents and other white people. He now wants to know more about his culture, ethnicity and biological family. He desperately desires for his lost heritage and seeks his obscure true identity. John happens to cross path with Marie, a Native

American activist who is annoyed by white people like Jack Wilson, a writer of mystery who claims to have a Native American origin. John felt as if a piece of him was missing. He then moves to Seattle to work as a construction worker, instead of going to college. As he couldn't find his relations and being frustrated he goes out killing white people. The novel shows many instances where the cultural differences between the whites and the Native Americans are shown invariably.

In the novel *Indian Killer*, the protagonist, John Smith, is a Native American who was adopted by a well to do white couple who did not have a child of their own. When he grew up he realized that he was different from his parents and gradually wanted to know about his original mother. He wanted to "reclaim one's own past" (Barry, 2008:193). He struggled mentally and was unable to fit in the white society. He started to imagine how his life would have been if he was never given up by his biological

mother. He imagined his life in reservation (place where Native Americans lived) as he never got to live in one. They would not have much money or enough food to eat but would have been surrounded by his people. He would have played with his community people and would have listened to the age old magical stories of his ancestors. He would have participated in 'Grass-dance' and 'Owl-dance' during the pow-wows. He would have celebrated other social functions. But, as he lived in a white society he did not know how to be a part of such Native American cultural events.

The age-old cultural practices of the Native-Americans were suppressed by the white people. An example of 'pow-wow' can be given. A pow-wow is a social gathering or ceremony of Native-American people which involves singing, dancing and feasting. In the novel, a group of Native-American students of the University of Washington, led by a student named Marie Polatkin wanted to celebrate pow-wow in the university. When the university administration did not agree to it, the Native-American students illegally held a pow-wow inside the university campus. It was like a protest against the university administrators, who were all white Americans. It can be seen as a protest against the white American community as a whole. And the students represented the whole Native-American community.

"John barely made eye contact with Marie, instead, he watched all of the Indians dancing in circles on the grass. It was an illegal pow-wow, not approved by the University. John could figure out that much when he noticed how the dancers were trampling on the well-kept lawn. Indians were always protesting something. Marie had organized the pow-wow as a protest against the University's refusal to allow a pow-wow. Only a few of the Indians had originally known that, but most everybody knew now, and danced all that much harder." (*Indian Killer*, p.32-33)

From this instance it can be seen how the Native-American students were deprived of their age-old tradition and cultural practices. As a result, the students got in protest. It's a small example

where we find the suppression of Native-American cultural practices by the white people.

As a result of the long term suppression, there were many Native Americans who relatively forgot their traditions and cultures. They were forced into the new white traditions and cultures. It may be termed as the "hybridization of colonial languages and cultures, in which imperialist importations are superimposed on indigenous traditions" (Abrams, 245). There were many groups and establishments which tried to rejuvenate their traditions and cultures by recapitulating or remembering their past. There were not many books written on their culture or traditions, so they depended mostly on the oral literature and the stories narrated by the old Native American people. John Smith was one such person who forgot or rather was deprived of his cultural background. John did not know how to perform in Native American cultural activities and he was somehow spaced out of his own people. He also did not know his ethnic tribe or clan. Whenever he was asked about his tribe he bluffed about it. "When asked by white people, he said he was Sioux, because that was what they wanted him to be. When asked by Indian people, he said he was Navajo, because that was what he wanted to be." (*IK*, 32)

The suppression was such that even the syllabus of the Native American Literature at the university was biased. The prescribed books were authored or co-authored by white men and women. "Marie was completely shocked by the course reading list" (*IK*, 58). In such manner the history and literature of the Native Americans were modified according to their convenience. The true essence of it was somewhat lost in the process. It resulted in wrong preaching or learning of one's cultures and traditions. The native writers were not given that much chance to write about their own history. The oral literature which was passed on from generations was a pure way to remember and understand their heartrending past.

Not only they were deprived of their culture and traditions, but the Native Americans were also not allowed to talk in their native languages.

Children were separated from their parents and were converted into Christianity. They were made to learn English and were not allowed to speak in their mother-tongue. If anyone disobeyed, they were brutally punished. "He knew that priests had cut out the tongues of Indians who continued to speak their tribal languages" (IK, 29). In due course of time, the following generations of the Native Americans became drifted away from their own language and traditions. A very rare number of people spoke in their native tongue. As a result a "double or hybrid identity" of the Native Americans was formed. Most of them faced identity crisis and John Smith surely was one of them. John Smith was entangled between the white society where he grew up and the Native American society to which he was blood-related. John was not accepted wholly in the white society where he faced discrimination due to his skin colour, even though he was adopted in a well to do white family. When the grown up John wanted to go back to his roots, it turned more problematic to him. He did not know which tribe he belonged to, he could not speak any Native American tribal language, he barely knew the traditions and cultures of his native and also he did not have any Native American friends. When John got a chance to befriend Marie Polatkin, a Native American social activist and student, he was scared and ashamed of himself being adopted by a white family. He thought that if they knew he was adopted and grew up in a white family, he might be unaccepted or made fun of.

The protagonist, John Smith was so angry with the white skinned people that he wanted to kill them. He held them responsible for the poor situation of the Native Americans. "John knew he could kill a white man, but he was not sure which white man was responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (IK, 27). He even had a tough time deciding which white man deserved to die – richest or the poorest white man. Eventually, the killer selects a random white person on the street and murders him. He wanted the white people to be scared of the Native Americans. Gradually, many killings happen and the situation in the city worsens. The murderer was then named 'the Indian killer'. It

was not taken lightly by the whites and as a result, the white people also began to attack the Native Americans. They were brutally beaten up on the roads. It had turned into a cultural clash where the Native Americans were targeting the whites and vice versa. All the Native Americans were then kept under surveillance and the circumstances became very difficult.

In such a situation where the whites were enjoying the white privilege, there were some white American people as well who wanted the opposite. They wanted to turn or be blood-related to the Native Americans. They were impressed by the whole concept of the exotic Native-American cultures and traditions. Such people were disliked and made fun of by the Native-Americans. An example can be given of a character from the novel. He is one Dr. Clarence Mather who was a professor of Native-American literature in the University of Washington. He was a white but he claimed that he had Native-American blood in him as one of his forefathers was a Native-American. He also wrote books on Native American Literature and lifestyle. But, the Native Americans did not accept his claims of being one of them and also his books. For an instance, when Dr. Mather once went for a press meet of his upcoming book on the Indian killer, the Native Americans protested against it. He was termed as a 'wannabe Indian'. Dr. Mather was usually kind towards the Native Americans and used to visit bars where only the Native Americans used to go, sometimes he even paid the bills of a few young people. By seeing his kindness he was humorously addressed as 'Casper the Friendly Ghost' by some regular visitors of the bar.

In conclusion it can be said that *Indian Killer* is a significant example to show the struggles of the Native Americans. The Native American cultural practices and values had become suppressed in front of the white dominant culture. The dominance resulted into losing of importance of their cultural practices and values in the bigger preview. To make things different many youths came up to form organizations to protest against it. They wanted to make their long-lost traditions and culture glorified

again. They wanted an equal space and position in the country which was once their motherland.

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