

Humour Abetting the Representation of Stereotypes: A Reading of Sherman Alexie's "Assimilation"

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Abstract

For centuries, ethnic minorities such as Native Americans had been suffering from misrepresentations in fiction and media. The repetitive appearance of the stereotypes, of course, has an influence on the way they are perceived by the outside world. Many writers of Native American origin attempt to challenge the negative stereotypes and present a true and real picture of Indians. Native American writers use humour and satire as a unifying force which will help bind the different tribes and in turn result in the combined resistance against the white colonisers. Sherman Alexie uses humour and irony as effective tools to unveil the deterioration and estrangement in the lives of Indians who had been suffering discrimination under the imperial power for many decades. The present study analyses Sherman Alexie's short story, "Assimilation" from his collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. I attempt to validate Alexie's use of humour, irony and satire in bringing about a catharsis for Native Americans.

Keywords: Indigenous literature, American literature, colonialism, culture, assimilation

"It seems native peoples' histories have been ignored and replaced by the myths of historians. This is not acceptable." (Joanna Osburn Bigfeather, Cherokee Artist)

The histories of Native Americans have been 'ignored'; instead we find an abundance of 'myths' related to them. The creator of these myths is the white colonists. The white's easy

access to mainstream literature and media made possible the propagation of stereotypes of Indians – the stereotypes of the good Indian (Noble Savage) and the bad Indian (Ignoble Savage). The noble savage is harmless, needs paternalistic guidance and is subservient to his master. The ignoble savage, on the other hand, is primitive, devilish, and is portrayed as having exaggerated skin colour and racial features (dark skinned people with high cheekbones and braided black hair). Thus, the Indians were demoralised by the colonisers whose only aim was to vitiate the image of the Indian and justify the colonisation of their land as the ‘white man’s burden’.

Many writers of Native American origin attempt to challenge the negative stereotypes and present a true and real picture of Indians. Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’ Alene Indian, is often criticised for his negative representation of Indians as such as the stereotype of the Drunken Indian or the Vanishing Indian. Louis Owens observes that new American Indian novels “articulate in sometimes extraordinarily well-disguised form the familiar stereotype of the Vanishing American, Indians who are romantic, unthreatening, and self-destructive. Indians who are enacting, in one guise or another, the process of vanishing” (qtd. in Evans 47). This repeated use of negative stereotypes helps to accentuate the mainstream notions of Indians. Alexie is often criticised by Indians for satisfying his white audience by providing them with images of the Indian Savage. Gloria Bird opines Alexie’s use of negative stereotypes “becomes problematic ... when this is the only exposure to native literature to which mainstream readers are exposed” (“Exaggeration” 48). By his use of the stereotype of the Drunken Indian, Alexie attempts to make Indians aware of this destructive activity they engage in and also wants them to come out of this state and become sober.

The recurrent, historical image of the subjugation of Indians which is prevalent in Alexis’ writings is linked to the techniques of oral tradition. The repetition of these images

gives his writings the status of a survival document. Alexie seems to convince his Indian readers that “There is nothing we cannot survive” (Old Shirts 47). The author very realistically depicts the doomed lives of Indians on the reservation; the lives of the people who have to either entirely pretermite their traditional culture and become wholly assimilated into the culture of their oppressor or to resist absorption into the white culture.

Sherman Alexie uses humour and irony as effective tools to unveil the deterioration and estrangement in the lives of Indians who had been suffering discrimination under the imperial power for many decades. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn observes, “Of course, when literary form, types, and features become overused and outlive their original vitality, they often become transformed into stereotypes, inviting a literary mode such as satire or the inflection of irony to reinvigorate them with meaning” (qtd. in Evans 50).

Guisela M. Latorre stresses the regenerative and transgressive power of humour. She reflects, “the use of humour, wit, irony and satire in the work by these artists [the Chicano and Native American] function in both cases as strategies of cultural survival as well as a means to expose racial, social and gender hierarchies in U.S. dominant culture” (2).

Employing humour in the midst of the tug of war between Euro-American and Native American cultures is, as Kenneth Lincoln notes, a “risky business” (35). It requires much intellectual genius for the humour to be registered by readers. Writers also manipulate humour with the intention of giving a temporary relief from the serious situation in which the oppressed (here, Indians) find themselves in (Lincoln 36).

Alexie complains that because he employs humour in his works people mistake him to funny and not serious. But his humour emerges as an effective tool for assessing as well as challenging the representations of Indians since many generations (Coulombe 95). The use of humour defies the long-held notion of the ‘stoic Indian warrior’ which is often attached to

Indians. Kenneth Lincoln quotes Stanley Vestal who views Indians as “humorous, sexy, sensitive, touchy and quick-tempered, a great gossip and practical joker, a born mimic, a politician from infancy, and an incorrigible lover of human society” (13). “Humor when used politically always goes after people with more power and systems and institutions that have more power. The problem comes when it’s a joke about somebody with less power than you, and so you have to be very careful with that stuff” (Interview)

Native American artists use humour and satire as a unifying force which will help bind the different tribes and in turn result in the combined resistance against the white colonisers. To quote the art historian Elizabeth Childs, “when the dominant ideology seeks to repress its opposition, the less powerful may forge solidarity and identity through humor and satire” (qtd. in Latorre 3). Thus, the Natives changed their position from the ‘ridiculed’ to the ‘one who ridicules’.

Alexie looks upon humour as “an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds” (qtd. in Grassian 76). Alexie dwells on different issues related to the lives of Indians- violence, abuse, alcoholism, lack of education, unemployment- the problems faced by majority of Natives on the reservation. As a child Alexie was often ridiculed by others because of his abnormally big head and physical abnormalities (Alexie was born with hydrocephalus and had to undergo a major brain surgery when he was six months old. He faced high risk of death or mental disability.) In his partly autobiographical novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, Alexie writes,

But my hands and feet were huge. My feet were a size eleven in third grade!

With my big feet and pencil body, I looked like a capital L walking down the road.

And my skull was enormous.

Epic.

My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids just called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their finger down on my skull, and say, “I want to go there.” (3)

Though the writer presents the situation in a humorous manner, the readers feel the pain and stress of the child who feels like an outfit and an object of ridicule. He escaped this humiliation using his humour. Alexie says, “Humor is self-defense on the rez. You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh” (qtd. in Grassian 2).

Alexie’s use of irony gives him the figure of a ‘trickster’. Louis Owens observes, “[H]e is the crazy, creative Indian negotiating urban America. Polysemic as well as multifunctional, coyote and his stories just keep ‘going along,’ somewhere beyond interpretation, epitomizing resistance and survival” (qtd. in Evans 48). Alexie has a rebellious attitude about him. He does not believe in the revival of Native American tradition or values. His writings stress the social and moral duty of writers. “I’ve come to the realization that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read mainstream fiction... For entertainment and a form of escape. I don’t want to write books that provide people with that. I want books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend” (qtd. in Grassian 14).

The present study analyses Sherman Alexie’s short story, “Assimilation” from his collection of short stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. I attempt to validate Alexie’s use of humour, irony and satire in bringing about a catharsis for Native Americans.

In “Assimilation” we confront the problems Indians face because of their assimilation to the culture of the coloniser. Mary Lynn is a Coeur d’Alene Indian married to a white man. Mary Lynn had left her reservation long ago. Mary feels disillusioned with the white society and feels an urgent need to associate with her native culture. It might be as a result of this disengagement that she feels a desire to go to bed with an Indian man. ““For the first time in her life, she wanted to go to bed with an Indian man only because he was Indian. She was a Coeur d’Alene Indian married to a white man; she was a wife who wanted to have sex with an indigenous stranger” (*Toughest Indian* 5).

Mary hopes that “sleeping with an Indian can help her recover her cultural self, which has been steadily eroding all her life, and more so in the years since she moved off the reservation” (Heldrich 33). She does not care about who or what the man is; she just wanted “the darkest Indian in Seattle—the man with the greatest amount of melanin—and get naked with him in a cheap motel room” (7). Only then can she fully experience the racial otherness.

Her disillusionment with the white culture is compared to her alienation from her white husband. This has nothing to do with problems in their relationship. She wants to cheat on her white husband for the simple reason that he is ‘white’. She finds it difficult to concentrate during her sexual encounter with her husband. She longs to “feel it again, whatever it was” (5). She had lost contacts with her reservation. She wants to experience her Native culture and feel close to it once again. Mary Lynn feels like a complete failure and feels desperate when she realises that she has not yet noticed her disinterest. The author wants to suggest that an Indian might feel like an alien in the white society, but it, in no way, affects the society. It becomes solely the problem of the alienated Indian.

Mary feels caught between the two cultures- the Native culture and the white culture. She listens to Big Mom Singers’ powwow CDs and at the same time reads the poems of

Emily Dickinson. She has slept with a white ‘stranger’ then why not an Indian stranger. She calls this “a carnal form of affirmative action.... Rebellion, resistance, revolution!” (7)

Alexie mocks at the stereotype of Indians when he describes Indian who had affair with Mary – “Thirty pounds overweight, with purple scars crisscrossing his pale chest and belly” (7). He is also figured as “plain and desperate and lonely” (8), the exact images of Indians created by white colonisers. The man does not seem to have any objection or choice when Mary approaches him. He seems really desperate.

Mary seems to have a negative attitude towards her reservation. She had been happy in her reservation but she had left it without regrets and has no urge to return to it. She describes the Coeur d’Alene men as “liars, cheats, and thieves” (8). “As a teenager, she’d dated only white boys. As an adult, she’d only dated white men. God, she hated to admit it, but white men—her teachers, coaches, bosses, and lovers—had always been more dependable than the Indian men in her life” (8). Here, Alexie seems to present a negative picture of Indians.

Alexie mocks at the stereotype of the ‘Indian Warrior’ when he writes that the scars on the Indian man’s belly and chest was there not a result of knife fighting but probably because of a heart surgery. “She wanted to know the scars’ creation story – she hopes this Indian man was a warrior with a history of knife fighting – but she feared he was only carrying the transplanted heart and lungs of another man” (9).

The author indirectly refers to social discrimination that prevailed in the white society through his reference to the pan-Asian restaurant that Mary and her husband Jeremiah go to. The restaurant had an Asian name, most of the waiters were Asian, the food tasted Asian but the ownership was in the hands of whites. Alexie ironically suggests the utilisation of ethnicity by the Euro-American society (13). Indians from the reservation are not expected to

be smart. Thus, Jeremiah was surprised when he found Mary smart, forward and intelligent (13).

Alexie mocks at the Whites who are unable to distinguish between Asians. For them, the Chinese and the Koreans are the same. “...these Asian restaurants, they hire Asians indiscriminately because they think white people won’t be able to tell the difference.’ ‘White people can’t tell the difference’”(13). Her husband also declares that his association with an Indian will not make him an Indian (13). Likewise, her association with the white culture have not made her a white, and thus her disillusionment.

The relationship of Mary Lynn with her white husband is also humorously presented by the writer. Mary wants a fifth child so that she could decide as to whether the family was a white family or an Indian family. When Jeremiah replies that a family is a family, Mary retorts that only a white would say so. Only a white will talk about the absence or can ignore the presence of discrimination against Indians (16). Jeremiah was, before his marriage to Mary, had regarded race as a “social construct, an illusionary” (16). But now he has come to realise that race is a “Frankenstein monster” (17) that has grown beyond control. He has also come to recognise race in the eyes of whites and also Indians.

Alexie’s characters are genealogically Indian and are fully aware of their racial identity, but they do not fall into the stereotypes created by the non-natives. They are white collar Native Americans who most often speak English, maintain loose contacts with the reservation, and who do not drink.

White characters are silenced in Alexie’s work. Language is the means by which truth and reality become established. Alexie, by making his Indians speak, takes control of the hierarchical structure of power and thus reconstructs the concepts of truth and reality. When mainstream literature presents Indians as savage and evil, Alexie makes his white characters

evil and heartless. They abuse children (the white father of Reggie Polatkin in *Indian Killer*), rape women (Sheridan in *Reservation Blues*) etc. Thus, he decentres the whites and otherizes mainstream culture.

His Indians are, contrary to what portrayed in his earlier works, successful, sophisticated, urban Indians who hold university diplomas and have high salary jobs, wear denim jacket, polo or Tommy Hilfiger, drive Toyota Camry or Saab, smoke faux cigarettes, and who, in most cases, has a white partner. They are different from the jobless, dislocated, drunken figures in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *Reservation Blues* (1995). Through his portrayal of well-to-do and assimilated Indians Alexie challenges the stereotypes and critiques the question, “What is an Indian?” (*Toughest* 218). The stories in *The Toughest Indian* shed light on how Alexie uses stereotypes and counter-stereotypes to challenge historical representations of Indians.

Thus, Alexie successfully employs humour “to heal and to hurt, to bond and to exorcize, to renew and to purge” (Lincoln 5). Humour, in Alexie’s writings, allows Indians to think over and evaluate their representation and, at the same time, it encourages the non-Indian readers to revise and change their understanding of Indians.

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