



## RESERVATION AND HOPE AS TWO OPPOSING FORCES IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the life and patterns of people living in reservation in Sherman Alexie's, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The protagonist Arnold represents the voice incarnate of the novelist representing the changing social order of Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit. The challenges that he faces during his life in the school, within the community and the society at large show him as the new voice of nationalism and the changing ideology of a new social order.

**Keywords:** *Reservation, Alcoholism, Identity Crisis.*

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The name of Sherman Alexie has become the most endearing one among Native American literary arena. This prolific writer with his bunch of literary works - *The Business of Fancy Dancing I Would Steal Horses, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, The Toughest Indian in the World, Ten Little Indians, Reservation Blues, Indian Killer, Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* – herald a new era in Postcolonial immigrant literature by depicting truthfully the life of immigrants and the native dwellers. His novels mainly deal with the questions of violence, dejected life and living in the reservation, and problems identity crisis. The novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a realistic reflection of the life of

the Part-Time Indian. The blending of dream and desire on one hand, the other is frustration and challenges makes this novel a virtuoso ground of depicting the subsumed soliloquies of the self.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a biting indictment of the system of American Indian reservations as a system which is isolating, othering and smothering the Native people. Over the course of hundreds of years the Indians have come to equate American Indian tribes with the reservations. The Indians are impoverished because they are trapped in the reservation under the debilitating cycles of poverty and neglect. The life in the reservations is highly traumatic. Reservations are prisons of poverty. The cycle of poverty and



alcoholism causes depression among the inhabitants. The life in the reservation is very hard for all the inhabitants. There is extreme poverty in the reservation. Instead of fighting against the odds, many of the inhabitants opt to become alcoholics in order to relieve their pain and suffering. Arnold's description of reservation is "Reservations were supposed to be prisons... Indians were supposed to move on to reservations and die... Reservations were meant to be death camps" [1]. Moreover, it is a prison of poverty where people are trapped. They are confined because they lack education and they do not have any idea of escape from this kind of confinement.

Arnold, the protagonist in the novel is tossed between the worlds of love and lost. He is the symbolic replica of a new world emerging out from the horizons of negligence, depression and rejection. He is questing for an identity – the pole star of a new social order – representing the voices of the destitute slum dwellers. He struggles hard to restore the balance of the society and with this course of action he himself balances his self. He faces innumerable challenges on his way to balance his inner poise amidst outer frustrations. The protagonist feels the otherness because of discrimination experienced even from his own reservation where his own people regard Arnold as an outsider making his identity crisis a complicate one. In the novel Arnold appears to be a new social force "combating the old social forces in an effort to find his individuality" [3]. In the epiphany Arnold is set to see himself as half-Indian Junior and half-white Arnold. Instead of belonging to a specific ethnic group Arnold feels that he belongs to many different groups; he is multi-tribal. This is the new identity that Arnold embraces on. It now dawns upon him that he belongs to a million different tribes.

Arnold is representing a hope amidst calamities. His frustrated soul laments: "But, we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are" [1]. Reservation is a dumping ground of wasted potential and crushed dreams. Arnold squarely faces problems as he tries to fit in with the existing situations in the reservations and in Rearden School. It is all because he wanted to do what he as an

individual wants to do rather than following what others in the reservation would have him to do. Thus, the cause of the conflict in the novel is due to the dilemma that Arnold faces.

The representation of identity crisis is one of the most significant aspects of the novel. People in the reservation are viewed with contempt by the outside world. Their life is not at all marked by success. It is in this context that Arnold decided to achieve more out of life than to succumb to poverty, alcoholism and depression. But, his desire for a bright future made him a social pariah on the reservation. Rearden School where Arnold got admitted for high school education is meant for the children of rich white farmers. There, Arnold faces racism and he has to painfully adjust to cultural shocks. His peers either bully him or ignore him. The situation improved for Arnold once he started to assert himself with a hard punch on the nose of the fat guy, Roger. He begins to earn the respect of his classmates. Then, he wins the heart of Penelope. He becomes the star basket ball player of Rearden team and he leads it to victory against the reservation team. While Arnold tries to fit in with Rearden School he is ostracized in reservation as an outcast.

In the case of Arnold, he has actually created an opportunity for himself after getting counseled from Mr. P, his geography teacher in the reservation school. It is as if Arnold has opted for a life of opportunity for success than a life marked by alcoholism, drug addiction and ultimately depression and poverty. His bitter experience after throwing the geography text book that his mother had used during her school days thirty years ago has shown him the kind of poverty and the futile education system on the reservation. He realized the significance of the advice of Mr. P and cherished ambition for success in life. The Rearden School and the reservation are separated by a distance of twenty two kilometers. He has no mode of transport to reach the school; often he covered the distance by hitchhike or walk or sometimes he did not go to school. Arnold's choice for a bright future made him a social pariah on the reservation.

On the other hand Arnold gets a serious blow from his own community. The people of the



community consider Arnold as traitor when he leaves the reservation. His identity is torn in half; at Rearden School he is half-Indian and on the reservation he is half-white. The struggle on the part of Arnold is that he still wants to retain his identity in the reservation in spite of his shift to Rearden School for better education. Through this novel Alexie does the task of empowering the native youth by presenting a model in the character of Arnold. It is the story of a teenager who struggles for his identity. The decision of Arnold to join the all white school in Rearden could not be tolerated by his community members in the reservation. They all treated him as a traitor. His bosom friend, Rowdy beat him severely on his face. His people in the reservation ill-treated him even during the wake following the death of his grandmother. Arnold is called "retard" and "globe" [1]; these are the nick names in which he is called by bullies in the reservation. Gordy reflects on his situation by saying, "Life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community" [1]. This conflict arises out of identity crisis in the novel. This theme of identity is frequently seen in young adult novels in general. In spite of all indignities heaped on him Arnold forgives them with broadmindedness. On a different level, Arnold experiences racial aloofness on the part of the white students of Rearden School. The fat boy Roger tried to bully him and called him a "squaw boy" [1]. The blood oozed out when Arnold hit him on Roger's nose. Anyway, the relation between him and the white guys of the school improved gradually. Arnold has reconciled himself with the white students of Rearden school in due course of time. And back on his home front, Arnold has come out with a hand of friendship to his old friend Rowdy. He has forgiven Rowdy in spite of all the setbacks he received from him for the friendly overtures that he has shown to him. Finally, Arnold finds positive results on the part of Rowdy. He has accepted the hands of friendship of Arnold which gives a note of hope to the ending of this novel. Arnold's father is an alcoholic who does not turn up during Christmas celebration. When he came back later he has given Arnold a five dollar bill which smells alcohol and cigarette. Although his father was a drunken fellow there is a kind of deep

love relationship between both of them. He has forgiven his father whole heartedly. It is as if the Native Americans cherish human relationships as one of the Ten Commandments. In *Flight*, Zits, finally forgives all of the oppressors of his community. Zits is denied of a decent family life by these oppressors. But, he extends olive branch to them in return. Here, it is worthwhile to remember a quote by Desmond Tutu, the Nobel laureate South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop; he says that there is "no future without forgiveness," [2]. Alliances with his community and with other races are possible only by the act of forgiveness. Thus forgiveness extends not only in forgiving regeneration of old friendship but it also leads to establishing cross-racial alliances.

The life in the reservation is devastating; even Arnold himself suffers a series of loses. He lost his 'amazing' grandmother, his sister and her husband and his father's friend Eugene who was shot on his face while arguing with his friend over the last few drops of alcohol left in the almost empty bottle. These deaths are related to alcoholism. Life on the reservation is altogether destructive. Rowdy told him that his sister Mary lost her life only because of him. She left the reservation only after she had left it. The life in reservation is very rough and tough. Fistfight is one of the unwritten norms in the reservations [1]. Arnold is often bullied and beaten up either by his seniors or even by Rowdy. Thus, he always becomes a member of the "Black-Eye- of-the-Month Club" [1]. Reservation is a bad place for Indians since it fails to realize their dreams or get any chances or development in their lives. Reservation is a place of crushed dreams.

Alcoholism is the direct off-shoot of poverty in the reservation. The poverty in the reservation affects the community spiritually. Arnold says, "Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor" [1]. It is clear from the descriptions of Arnold that his family suffers from want of fund to store sufficient food items in the refrigerator. His sister sulks away from this dismal condition by hiding in the basement or his parents seek refuge in alcohol or Arnold himself runs away from the reservation in



order to join the all-whites high school at Rearden. Arnold tells that reservations are "meant to be prisons" [1]. These are for the Indians to die and disappear. But, he is happy about the positive aspects of reservation life also. He says that "the reservation is beautiful" [1]. He is euphoric about the millions of pine trees and some of them are older than the United States. More over the reservation is home to a very close-knit community of Indian families where everybody intimately knows each one else; details like the parents and grandparents of the kids and even sizes of shoes of community members are taken into account. This is in sharp contrast to the family relationship in a typical white family in Rearden where the members of families are even strangers to each other. Thus, the reservation for Arnold is both a heaven and a hell. There is the paradox that reservation is a home to Arnold at a particular point of time and at another moment he wants to move away from it. The cycles of poverty and alcoholism cause depression among the inhabitants.

The sense of community is what it strikes a reader as one of the important aspects of native people. Despite the manifold problems in the reservation each member of the community knows each other. But, in Rearden the only time everyone gets together is during sporting events. There is no lack of social interaction; rather they respect the tradition even in critical times. The people in the reservation laughed even during tragic moments; it is one of their set reactions. The community people gathered around the coffin of Arnold's grandmother and all laughed when the coffin was lowered into the ground. They continued to laugh as the corpse was being covered with dirt. It is as if they find happiness and enjoyment in pain and suffering. The ear drops of these people are got transformed into pearls. All of them laughed on their way back from the funeral ground onwards until they reached their homes.

Finally, we see Arnold's stature in the community undergoing a gradual positive change. Now, he could re-establish rapport with Rowdy. Above all the most important development that we can see in the life of Arnold is the transformation of his view in relation to immigration of people of diverse races and creeds to America from different

parts of the world. Thus, this novel ends on a note of acceptance, reconciliation and hope.

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