

Portrayal Of Urban Indian Identity In Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine"

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Abstract

Alexie has devoted a significant amount of his energy to crafting a precise portrayal of the contemporary Native American experience in the dynamic and evolving metropolitan environment. In Ten Little Indians, Alexie places his characters in a more favourable position of adapting to their metropolitan environment. Alexie's characters have discovered a satisfactory balance between the reservation and the metropolis. The Native American identity continuum, characterised by dualistic identities, offers these characters the choice to either assimilate into or resist the mainstream culture. Alexie is actively preserving the Indian heritage he highly values and safeguarding the indigenous discourse's perception in today's industrialised society by not assimilating it into the dominant white culture. This form of retrospective cultural preservation serves to forward Alexie's objective of establishing a completely indigenous, urban literary Indian. This study examines the concept of Urban Indian Identity as shown in Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine".

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Introduction

Regarding Sherman Alexie's aptitude at realistically and respectfully depicting Native Americans from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Alexie's exploration of urban identity is a recurring theme in his whole collection of writings. The significance of Native American tradition is clearly apparent in his work. Preserving cultural traditions, such as holy ceremonies and traditional dances and rituals, is essential for the historical and cultural identity of Native American communities.

The issue of Indian identity is demonstrated by the transition towards a more positive and compassionate outlook. In the short tale "The Search Engine," the protagonist, Corliss Joseph, explores the concept of Indian identity and how it is shaped by the prevailing cultures of both historical and contemporary times.:

She knew Indians were obsessed with authenticity. Colonized, genocided, exiled, Indians formed their identities by questioning the identities of other Indians. Self-hating, self-doubting, Indians turned their tribes into nationalistic sects. But who could blame us our madness? Corliss thought. We are people exiled by other exiles. ("The Search Engine" 40)

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Alexie's perspective on Indian identity is closely connected to the historical context of America, including both its colonisers and the colonised. Alexie, a Native American author, prioritises the consolidation of the Indian identity and employs his characters to elaborate on this concept. Corliss, an aspiring poet, stumbles into the poetry of another Spokane Indian, which motivates her to find this someone who shares her experiences as a lonely Native American in pursuit of beauty and creativity. Native American writing aims to achieve strength via unity, rather than fragmentation. Therefore, it is crucial to concentrate on the comprehensive Native American encounter, disregarding distinctions among tribes, areas, individuals, or preconceived notions, and examining how these encounters have transformed and influenced the identity of urban Indians.

Sherman Alexie's protagonists frequently prioritise the abandonment of strict traditions in favour of adopting contemporary, urbanised practices that better align with their status in the industrialised society. Corliss reconciles her dual identity as an Indian living in a predominantly white society by integrating the metropolitan aspects of her life with the traditional components of her cultural heritage. This allows her to navigate between the two cultures without completely identifying with either.

Corliss asserts that she desired a life that fulfilled her personal aspirations and grappled with the challenge of reconciling her own identity. She sought a life that was both extensive and authentic to her Aboriginal heritage. She had used her intuitive talent to her advantage throughout high school by contacting the English and History instructors at a prestigious local preparatory school and inquiring about the literary works that will be assigned to their students that year.

Corliss is actively seeking a compromise between the traditions of her cultural background and the rapidly expanding urban environment in which she has chosen to live. The plot is around her ongoing challenge of balancing her desire to satisfy her Indian family while also pursuing her own interests and desires, which predominantly revolve around white culture rather than Native issues. Corliss promptly commences assembling the components of what would soon evolve into her individual pursuit. Her relatives have consistently misunderstood her deep enthusiasm for literature and poetry. They insist that Corliss should utilise her talents in a manner that will contribute to the tribe's well-being and ensure the survival of her people.

Corliss has conflicted feelings about Indian/reservation culture, and rather than solely blaming mainstream American culture, as she had been taught to do while growing up on the reservation, Corliss also implicates Indians as being complicit in their economic and personal impoverishment due to their gradually accepted loss of self-sufficiency. (174)

This argument suggests that Corliss has positioned herself in a more advantageous position to comprehend her situation as an ethnic outsider compared to Alexie's previous characters. However, her inclination to study literature, particularly works produced by white males, contradicts the ideals of authenticity deeply ingrained in her mind. When she discovers another Indian who could potentially be a like-minded individual, she eagerly seizes the opportunity to embark on this quest.

Corliss diligently searches through the resources she has access to, primarily relying on her very knowledgeable Spokane Indian mother and the government documents that are available to her, in order to locate the enigmatic Harlan Atwater. Despite extensive digging, Corliss finds very little information, which is unusual given her mother's reputation for knowing everything about the Spokane Indian community and the government's reputation for meticulously documenting the lives of Indigenous people. Corliss has significant uncertainty and perplexity due to the absence of information, leading to contemplation that

Every moment of an Indian's life is put down in triplicate on government forms, collated, and filed. . . . How could this Harlan Atwater escape the government? How could an Indian live and work in the United States and not leave one piece of paper to mark his passage? (20-1)

Corliss starts questioning the genuineness of Atwater's identity; the only conclusion she can draw is that he was not a genuine Indian poet, but rather, an imposter of Caucasian descent pretending to be a Native American in order to benefit personally from his fabricated poetry.

Corliss discovers a three-decade-old telephone directory entry containing the contact details of Harlan Atwater, which unexpectedly establishes a connection between her and the one she has been relentlessly pursuing. Atwater, however, is unaccommodating towards Corliss' inquiries and abruptly terminates the conversation. Corliss' initial indication that Atwater may not be authentic. An Indian residing outside of a tribe, unknown to them and lacking any documented evidence of his existence, is unlikely to serve as a suitable role model for Corliss. Corliss resolves to find the truth behind this enigma and boards a bus to Seattle, the farthest distant destination she has ever journeyed from her reservation. The phenomenon of urban invisibility is a manifestation of the ongoing sense of isolation experienced by Native Americans who opt to live in cities. They find themselves detached from their cultural and communal roots, and in an environment that will never fully embrace them as anything other than outsiders.

Atwater, an Indian guy, was adopted and reared by a white couple, leading him to engage in behaviours that mimic his Indian heritage as a way to reconcile with his lost Native identity. To develop their individual comprehension of the Indian identity within their personal lives and tribal communities. Corliss is fully committed to the mission of revealing the true identity of Harlan Atwater. This quest is crucial for her to find a reflection of her own identity in another member of her tribe. This person embodies both the feasibility of her passion for studying poetry and the link to her cultural heritage, which she has been longing to find in her love for literature.

Ultimately, Corliss relinquishes her pursuit, permitting Harlan Atwater to depart without providing direct answers to her inquiries. Corliss' reluctance to achieve the desired closure in Atwater signifies her recognition that the sense of sacredness she sought may not be attainable for an Indian woman in an urban environment. Corliss is aware that she is still in a state of being neither fully accepted nor fully belonging, as she is a cultural mix caught between two different identities. She identifies with the Native American culture, but aims to navigate efficiently in an urban environment that can never fully embrace her as a member. Alexie's urban Indians often possess a dualistic identity due to their desire to assimilate into the dominant culture. This aspiration highlights the significant challenge they face in bridging the gap between these two cultures, as there exists a substantial barrier that prevents complete integration. The division between different aspects of Corliss' personality generates a feeling of discord and enables the development of her blended identity.

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