

# Musical Blues in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues

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**Abstract:** The present paper examines the stereotypical and dormant constructs of Native Americans and contrasts these with Alexie's view of Native American realities past and present, and his vision of how to survive against the claims of a predominant white environment. The prime part in the novel explores in detail how Alexie's plot sets a tone for cultural sensitivity (with a focus on music, storytelling, and religion) against the prevalent real-life situations that eventually creates an optimistic blending of Indian, white, and black cultural zones, enabling the main character to struggle against the odds. To him, culture is an indispensable act of balance between the cultural change and preservation. In respect to the conception of cultural others' in general and Native Americans in specific, this vividly contextualized and historicized trans-cultural narrative coloured with a multimedia approach sensitizes the students and questions them about their own internal and external cultural perspectives— a self-reflection evidently vital to the process of intercultural assimilation of knowledge.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar” [1] Sherman Alexie, in *Reservation Blues* mentions unidentified voices throughout the narrative, suggesting that the reservation itself was the voice, collective or individual. He incisively challenges the concept of a centre, suggesting it is merely a part of the Indian identity rather than a location of culture. He re-writes the image of the reservation; it becomes less of a space limited by boundary constraints associated with the reservation, and becomes more a centre of a living, moving collective space. Alexie modifies representations of the reservation to include an individual's authority to map out qualities such as integrity and resistance instead of submitting to the traumas of colonial oppression. His characters own the ability, then, to move between the spaces of the reservation and discern which elements of reservation life will be acceptable within the mapping process. Analysis of *Reservation Blues* underscores Alexie's work as a contribution to American Indian literature that contains certain traces of theory critical to the Native American canon. Alexie doesn't use character voices to preach a universal or national agenda but represents Indians with individual and collective voices in a multicultural society. This paper unravels Alexie's alternate image of the center, which changes from an element found in a place to a potential characteristic within a person. Alexie makes this clear in *Reservation Blues* because he includes cultural encounters

between characters that show an ability to change from the intercultural experience.

In *Reservation Blues*, the reservation is an opaque entity having human qualities, suggesting its participation in the interactive process that Native Americans experience. For instance, as the guitar plays music, Alexie portrays the reservation as capable of listening, or owning a human ability. Alexie's literary device of personification in terms of reservation solidifies Pratt's assertion that modern writings of contact zone experiences are identified as “testimonio”. She explains that it is a connection between literature and experience. In other words, the voice of the reservation is included in the Native American testimonio, Alexie mentions unidentified voices a few times throughout the narrative, suggesting that the reservation itself was the voice, collective or individual. For example, when Thomas wakes up one night and goes out on his porch “and listened to those faint voices that echoed all over the reservation” [2]. Another interpretation relates to the the reservation speaking among its inhabitants. Alexie includes the reservation as a member of a collective voice. Alexie implies that alternative interpretations how the reservation “speaks” to its people also allows alternative ways for Indians to voice concern about issues relevant to reservation life. *Reservation Blues* depicts the reservation as “gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still captured power and rage, magic and loss, joy and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too” [3]. The reservation resulted from colonialism, yet exists in the contemporary society. Alexie implies that instead of remaining static, the reservation—or the Indians who live there—must be in constant interaction with mainstream society. Contact begins with forgiving the colonizer on some level for the traumas brought with the situation of colonization, or accepting a Euro American presence in society. Alexie suggests that this attitude towards the colonizer is helpful because it removes psychological barriers. On the surface he changes the image of the reservation, but clearly sensitizes the reader to a shift in literary representations of post-colonialism to representations of postmodernism, or the interaction of different cultures. Alexie's characters take part in cultural exchange because Native and non- Native characters cross reservation borders, whether it be internal (Natives travelling between tribal

reservations) or external (outside members of society coming into the reservation), changing the perception of reservation borders from divisions to connections, or what Singh and Schmidt refer to as, “the construction and mobilization of difference” [4].

Blues is the connection which the characters use to navigate across social and cultural borders. Therefore, the music becomes part of the cultural exchange process.

Yet the music of the blues unites individuals with intimate and spiritual elements of their identity. Alexie ardently unleashes the ordinary ways which locate the Indian centre of culture. In this work, he employs the blues music as the medium that helps characters find out who they are in relation to others inside or outside their culture. Blues music and elder figures such as Big Mom help the characters realize that the Indian center is not the choice of where to live, but how to live. For instance, participating in blues music helps Thomas and Chess decide they would rather live outside the reservation. Robert Johnson's sentiments reveal that he is a great asset on the reservation. Victor also sticks on the reservation. Within a literary scope, these representations further situate Alexie's work as cosmopolitan in the literary canon. Alexie does not suggest forgetting about past traumas, but does imply that forgiveness is an integral component in relation to cultural survival. Alexie's depiction of the reservation also provokes the readers to engage the reservation in terms of what literary scholar David L. Moore terms “cultural property” in “Return of the Buffalo: Cultural Representation as Cultural Property” [5].

Representing the reservation with transformative qualities exposes expressive elements that are sacred to Indian culture, such as oral tradition, yet acknowledges the Western presence as part of the Indian experience. Conceding that a shared existence with Western culture remains everlasting, Indians face the challenge of protecting and maintaining cultural distinctions within the contemporary society. Alexie's innovative force is evident in his representations of the reservation as culturally distinctive to Indian identity. By giving the reservation human characteristics, Alexie makes it an active participant in the dialogic structure of the text. Dialogic, in this case, references the dialogism of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Blues is the primary feature of the cultural dialogue between Thomas Builds-The-Fire and blues legend Robert Johnson from the time they meet at the crossroads. The image of the guitar man and the devil meeting at a crossroads is common to Western mythology; however, Alexie changes the idea to reflect the redemptive qualities of cultural exchange instead of recalling past images of the Euro-American as a devil. Alexie personifies Johnson's guitar as he does the reservation, making it a participant in Alexie's dialogic narrative. The guitar speaks to Thomas the way another character would by providing insight to Thomas: “The blues always make us remember. Y'all need to play songs for your people. They need you” [6]. The narrative continues, “Music rose above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down” the shudder that passed through tree and stone, asphalt and aluminum” [7].

Blues music becomes the point from which the characters discover strengths and weaknesses when mapping their Indian identity and confronting complexities of cultural boundaries. Blues is the focal point for multicultural conversation between characters because the music Coyote Springs produces enables them to interact with New York producers Calvary Records and groupies Betty and Veronica, who are girls from Euro American mainstream society.

Alexie uses the element of popular culture to facilitate issues concerning Indian cultures today. For example, Chess accuses Victor and Junior of betraying their cultural heritage when they sleep with Betty and Veronica, two white groupies who follow the band. Thomas's relationship with Chess sparks topics of conversation such as mixed-blood Indians, which Alexie subliminally embeds as conflicting worldviews within immediate members of the Indian reservation society. The topic is not only a general perception of some Indians; but also a part of the process of identity. It shows how the characters engage or respond to the topics. Personal issues become part of greater issues in relation to the world at large. Alexie does not engage the subject of mixed-blood Indians with racism but does insert the issue into his narrative from the perspective of reservation Indians who consider it problematic to preserve cultural heritage.

Alexie simultaneously develops characters with both specific Indian qualities and more common American aspects. In doing so, he promotes a more complete human image of contemporary American Indians to a popular American audience. This significant contribution is achieved through a rather simple formula: the major protagonists portray contemporary American Indians in a specific world that is at once American and Indian. Ironically along with the protagonists that appear in the novel *Reservation Blues*, Alexie challenges Indians with other elements which compound the crisis of identity mapping—the perception of mixed-blood Indians—found in *Reservation Blues*. When Fraser notes the tension between protecting a culture yet exposing a culture by describing it in a written publication, Alexie responds:

I don't write about anything sacred. I don't write about any ceremonies; I don't use any Indian songs. . . . I approach my writing the same way I approach my life. It's what I've been taught and how I behave with regard to my spirituality. . . . My tribe drew that line for me a long time ago. It's not written down, but I know it. If you're Catholic you wouldn't tell anybody about the confessional. I feel a heavy personal responsibility, and I accept it, and I honor it. It's part of the beauty of my culture. [8].

Hence, it can be elucidated that “Alexie's delineation of *Reservation Blues* is not to destroy the reservation, but rather to mirror his vision of its present reality for the moral purpose of refashioning it and its members” [9], which solidifies his presence in the Native American literary scene, defying Bird's accusation that, “It is the exaggeration of despair without context that doesn't offer enough substance to be anything more

than a 'spoof' of contemporary reservation life" [10]. Alexie demonstrates that individuals experience failure in the novel, whether they reside inside or outside the reservation. Alexie's centre is not confined to a place, but is rather located within individuals who move beyond the margins literally and physically, and who collectively represent a living viable culture.

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