

ANGER, VIOLENCE, AND DARK HUMOR: A JOURNEY FROM INDIAN KILLER TO FLIGHT OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

Bimilin Jebarcy N,

Reg. No: 22113224012002, PhD Research Scholar,

Department of English, St. John's College of Art and Science, Ammandivilai, Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu, India Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India – 627012.

Dr. R. S. Regin Silvest,

Assistant Professor/Research Supervisor, Department of English, St. John's College of Arts and Science, Ammandivilai, Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu, India Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India – 627012.

Sherman Alexie's novels document his progression and maturity of ideas. While deeply rooted anger and bitterness drive his earlier works, such as *Indian Killer*, his more recent works such as *Flight* deal with anger, racism, and violence in a much wiser and thoughtful manner. Alexie even acknowledges this fact in an interview where he claims writing *Flight* as an antidote for writing *Indian Killer*, regretting writing such a violent book that is in his current opinion "a very fundamentalist, binary book, the product of youthful rage" (Jaggi 1). He also discusses in an interview on National Public Radio how his shift in tone has gained him recent criticism. When discussing the optimistic ending of *Flight*, he adds:

Well, I guess it was a form of prayer for me, I think. Maybe it was my way of hoping that something positive happens or hoping to be hopeful.

Certainly a couple of reviews have been really negative about the idea of this book ending with some sense of hope, and that made me laugh because I thought, you know, my entire career, I've been rewarded for my cynicism, and I'm being punished for my optimism now. (Roberts 7)

Despite some negative reviews, *Flight* embodies both Alexie's early passion and anger but also offers a more thoughtful and productive approach to coping with that pain. By Alexie's own admission, *Flight* is the more mature novel and one of the best avenues for introducing students to Alexie's works. However, *Flight* needs to be taught in the context of Alexie's earlier works because it is essential to show how many works Alexie has had to write in order to deal more wisely with his anger. Additionally, it is necessary to emphasize how Alexie's anger is at times righteous, but his books now focus more on mercy and healing rather than anger and violence. Ultimately, Alexie's progression from rage to reconciliation is a fascinating journey to explore with each of his compelling

works.

Alexie claims that the American Indian speaker does not need to know the name of any star because he is so defeated that he already expects to be disappointed by anyone and anything he encounters. Alexie takes the North Star, a symbol of truth, steadiness, and hope, and turns it into another disappointment, just another way to “break” the speaker’s heart. Alexie also uses dark humor in his poetry to explain Indians’ lack of hope and mistreatment by American society. Alexie portrays how Indians have been abused by American society. Alexie outlines how the Indians were deprived of all of their belongings only now to have their culture put on display in museums that they are charged to even view. His form of representation is comical with the idea of Buffalo Bill opening up a pawn shop, but the truths that Alexie reveals are hard to take in even when filtered through Alexie’s lens of humor.

The subjects of Alexie’s poetry are not limited to his experience on the reservation, especially in his more recent collections. Alexie demonstrates his wide range with poems such as “Independence Day” from his most recent collection of poetry, *Face* (2009). In “Independence Day,” Alexie tells about a run-in with a rude man in a parking lot in which Alexie was unnecessarily offensive in turn in front of his wife and two sons. Alexie is especially blunt. Here he reveals that he uses his writing as a weapon to avenge his people.

Alexie’s blunt writing style, he displays this theme of anger most aggressively in his third work of fiction, *Indian Killer* (1996). By far his angriest novel, *Indian Killer* follows an American Indian who was raised by white parents and ironically named John Smith. Through the perspective of the confused and isolated John Smith, “an Indian without a tribe,” Alexie explores the full extent of racial hatred as racial violence breaks out in Seattle after the Indian Killer kills and scalps white men (35). The novel was received with mixed reactions, and an interview about his disturbing book inspired reporter Gretchen Giles to write the article “Author Sherman Alexie is One Angry Young Man.”

In the interview with Giles, Alexie justifies the anger portrayed in *Indian Killer*, explaining the motivation behind his novel. He explains that critics complained about the anger throughout his first two novels, He wrote *Indian Killer* “as a response...to give people an idea of the kind of anger and the kind of rage that is in the Indian community, as well as that which is in the white community, directed toward Indians” (Giles). When read with this interview response in mind, Alexie’s unrestrained tone of rage is understandable. He has a right to be angry. He tells the reporter, “the United States is a colony, and I’m always going to write like one who is colonized, and that’s with a lot of anger” (Giles).

Although *Indian Killer* is an offensive book, Alexie claims that his purpose in writing it is to offend and affect people in order to reveal the ingrained racism that is so embedded in our culture that we are often oblivious to its existence. Alexie attempts to snap the reader out of this accepted state of racism and acknowledge the interracial hatred encompassing the United States.

Despite the anger that inevitably exists under the surface of Alexie's earlier works, his use of dark humor to mitigate his condemning claims makes even his most immature works worth analyzing.

Reservation Blues, Alexie integrates a prominent theme of humor into the story thread of three of the same characters from *The Lone Ranger*: Thomas, Victor, and Junior. In *Reservation Blues* (1995), Alexie uses the character Father Arnold to comment on the humor that exists among Indians: "He [Father Arnold] was impressed by the Spokane's ability to laugh. He'd never thought of Indians as being funny. What did they have to laugh about? Poverty, suicide, alcoholism?" (36). Alexie's earlier works demonstrate just exactly how Indians manage to laugh through a history of oppression.

In the interview, Alexie emphasizes Indians' ability to use humor as a means of coping with their pain:

The funniest groups of people on the planet that I've ever been around are Indians and Jews. So I think that says something about using humor to ward off centuries of oppression and genocide. I've heard Jews making jokes about Hitler. I've heard Indians make jokes about Custer—that takes a lot of strength. (Giles)

Alexie's writing mirrors his own observation of his culture. Although Alexie's works contain serious and disturbing truths, those same works are also packed with funny moments when Alexie takes on a more playful, mocking tone. Alexie's refines his ability to use humor to mitigate his anger in his more recent works. For example, Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary* breaks the tension with humorous realities such as "White people everywhere have always believed that the government just gives money to Indians," an accusation that many white readers are likely guilty of (119). Rather than condemning whites, Alexie playfully mocks a common misconception. He demonstrates a similar comical device to soften his condemnation of his racist peers later in his adolescent novel:

And Roger, being of kind heart and generous pocket, and a little bit racist, drove me home that night. And he drove me home plenty of other nights, too. If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing (129)

Alexie is able to use humor with phrases such as "a little bit racist" to break up the density of his content. He shows that despite the magnitude of his topic, he is able to use humor as a sort of catharsis just as the entire Indian race uses humor to cope with their pain in another excerpt from *The Absolutely True Diary*:

And I realized that, sure, Indians were drunk and sad and displaced and crazy and mean, but, dang, we knew how to laugh. When it comes to death, we know that laughter and tears are pretty much the same thing... Each funeral was a funeral for all of us. We lived and died

together. (166)

Alexie reiterates Indians' communal sharing of pain, and a sharing of laughter as a means of communal catharsis. Perhaps the most powerful example of laughter being used as a coping method also occurs in an episode from *The Absolutely True Diary*, when young Arnold Spirit learns of his sister's death as a result of a fire after a drunken party:

My dad was trying to comfort me. But it's not too comforting to learn that your sister was **TOO FREAKING DRUNK** to feel any pain when she **BURNED TO DEATH**... And for some reason, that thought made me laugh even harder. I was laughing so hard that I threw up a little bit in my mouth. I spit out a little piece of cantaloupe. Which was weird, because I don't like cantaloupe. (205)

In Arnold's attempt to deal with the knowledge of his sister's truly tragic death, he begins to laugh uncontrollably. Rather than demonstrating an entire race using laughter as a means of coping with a shared pain, Alexie portrays an individual Indian who reacts to a personal tragedy with laughter. Additionally, Alexie contributes his own humor to the already laughing situation with the cantaloupe component. An episode where a child is laughing hysterically after being told his sister was burned to death is disturbing, especially considering that it occurs in an adolescent novel. Therefore, Alexie quickly shifts to Arnold's absurd observation of the cantaloupe to lighten the mood, showing yet another facet of the dark humor that pervades Alexie's writing.

Alexie also utilizes humor to create a more lasting effect on his reader. He demonstrates his ability to manipulate humor in *The Lone Ranger* with lines such as "This morning I pick up the sports page and read the headline: **INDIANS LOSE AGAIN**. Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me" (179). The basic concept of a team dubbed the "Indians" losing yet again is, on certain levels, funny in its irony. However, Alexie takes the irony created by the news headline and gives the perspective of an Indian who can only respond to such cruelty with "Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me" (179). Alexie creates humor at the expense of Indians to show the pain evoked by such racist humor. Conversely, Alexie illustrates a white person's response to an Indian making light of the great sin against the Indian race in *The Lone Ranger* when two Indian characters, Victor and Thomas, have a conversation with a white woman, Cathy:

The three of them talked for the duration of the flight. Cathy the gymnast complained about the government, how they screwed the 1980 Olympic team by boycotting. "Sounds like you all got a lot in common with Indians," Thomas said. Nobody laughed. (67)

Whether an Indian is laughing to keep from crying, or making a joke to ease the tension,

or watching as he becomes the victim of a racist joke, Alexie brilliantly incorporates humor into the structure of his fiction to evoke a greater emotional response from his reader.

Of all of his works, *Flight* best demonstrates how shared humor can lead to reconciliation. When Alexie explores harsh realities concerning anger, poverty, and alcoholism, he creates a sense of unbearable despair; however, as he exhibits over and over in *Flight*, Alexie is able to break up moments of extreme emotion with effortless humor. One of the best examples of light-hearted humor amidst a painful moment occurs when Zits is in his father's body and has an odd encounter with a passerby. Zits runs into a man who is only described as a "gray man" (141). The exchange between the two men goes from violent and hateful to emotional and compassionate in the span of a few pages. The men are able to make such a leap in their relationship through a story that embodies the type of painful humor that Alexie is famous for.

The gray man tells Zits a story about his family and their pet bird. The man explains how he and his family loved the bird and how they had to rush the bird to the emergency vet after he fell in a pot of boiling water. The man describes his reaction to seeing the bird hooked up to a ventilator in the hospital. Zits tries not to laugh at the image of a tiny bird "hooked up to this tiny little oxygen machine" (148). Rather than getting angry at Zits' amusement at the situation, the man agrees with him:

Oh, no, that's the whole thing. It is funny. It's horrible, too. But it's hilarious at the same time. And when I saw that bird hooked up to those tiny little machines, I laughed...I laughed so hard that I forgot my wife and daughter were standing there...my little girl was ashamed of me. I turned her love and pain into a big fucking laugh...and then my wife and daughter left me" (148).

The gray man's story is the apotheosis of Alexie's dark humor. Alexie portrays what he does naturally in the whole novel of *Flight* on a smaller scale with the bird story. He takes something sad (a beloved pet bird's death) and shows the undeniable humor in the situation (the bird hooked up to tiny little machines). Then he uses the humor in the sad situation to reveal a larger truth within the man's family (the gray man's fear of disappointing his wife and daughter – a fear that mirrors Zits' father's belief that he could not be a father to Zits.) The story is a beautiful depiction of the healing that can occur through finding humor in sadness. The gray man cries as he tells the story, but Zits reassures him that his family will forgive him. The man goes from holding Zits by the neck to being completely vulnerable as he cries about his family.

Alexie shows how stories, especially the hilariously sad kind can bring two people who appear to have no common ground together in a moment of true connection and empathy. Alexie connects the gray man to the drunken homeless Indian Zits through a story, just as he connects

Zits to the reader through his stories. Alexie has the ability “to reach into the complexities of people's lives and experiences, making those moments in time funny but often tragic” (Lee 53). Through the exchange of genuine, funny, emotional stories, Alexie teaches the reader how to find common ground with a kid called Zits.

By allowing Zits to tell his stories to the reader in his comic voice, Alexie reveals larger truths that relate to many in the Native American community. He shows the family line of shame caused by poverty which leads to alcoholism and anger in the destructive circle of pain. However, Alexie uses humor to expose the underlying realities of Zits’ inherited suffering, which allows Zits to break the cyclical destruction of his fathers and escape his self-abuse. With the help of humor, Zits is able to discover his own self-worth and true identity as Alexie ends the novel full circle with Zits stating, “My real name is Michael. Please, call me Michael” (181).

Ultimately, Flight uses humor again and again as a tool for individual and communal catharsis. Just as Zits undergoes a small healing ceremony of reconciliation through the tragically humorous story of the “grey man,” the reader also undergoes the same act of healing and reconciliation by empathizing with the once angry Zits. Similarly, Zits’ ability to transform from a violent terrorist willing to open fire on a group of innocent people to a kind and responsible citizen willing to turn himself and his guns in to the police for a chance to heal, so does Alexie abandon his use of words as weapons as in his earlier works and instead uses humor to overcome his anger and create healing for himself and his reader. Alexie’s shift from the aggressive and violent Indian Killer to the peaceful conclusion of Flight represents his own emotional journey, coping with anger, racism, violence, and alcoholism.

References:

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