

# The Exploration of Native Americans' Identity Crisis through Sherman Alexie's Works

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**Abstract:** Sherman Alexie is a celebrated contemporary Native American writer, poet, and filmmaker whose works have now achieved a good amount of acclaim and appealed to considerable public attention in the American society. Alexie presents the modern Indians' confusion and struggle about their identities on or off the reservations, which conform to the research of "Identity Crisis", a noted idea in psychological realm coined by psychologists Erik Erikson. Based on both cultural and literary analysis to three of Alexie's most well-known works, namely *Ten Little Indians*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, this paper will first hypothetically propose several possible causes for explaining the exposed phenomena in the works, and then expound on the presumable resolution of Native Americans' identity crisis which Alexie subtly conveys in his works.

**Keywords:** Sherman Alexie; Native Americans; Identity Crisis; Causes; Resolution

## 1. Introduction

Sherman Alexie is a contemporary Native American writer, poet, and filmmaker whose works are now very popular among American readers. Alexie belongs to the second wave of Native American Renaissance, a phrase coined by critic Kenneth Lincoln, bringing new blood to the exuberant development of contemporary indigenous literature together with other famous American Indian writers, such as N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich.

As one of the most well-known and beloved literary writers of his generation, Sherman Alexie has won himself remarkable honors and numerous awards. For example, the story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* received PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction, and his first young adult novel, a semi-autobiographic book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* won the 2007 U.S. National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

His works usually draw materials from his own personal experiences and explore the lives of contemporary Native Americans who have been constantly struggling with themselves and their powerlessness in a predominantly white American society. "Indian Humor", the value of which young Alexie "quickly learned both as a means of deflecting the abuse from other children and also as a means of personal empowerment", is masterly used in most of his works often evoking sorrow contemplation as well as respect at the same time (Grassian 1)<sup>[4]</sup>. Motifs such as despair, poverty, and alcoholism among the lives of Native Americans are frequently used by Alexie. Modern American Indians' struggle for self-definition and quest for their dying out traditions are the commonly-reflected themes of Alexie's works through which we can have a better understanding of the Native American culture, their ethnic consciousness and also problems they confront in their current lives.

This paper will mainly apply a psychological concept named "Identity Crisis" put forward first by psychologist Erik Erikson and later developed by James Marcia to explore Native Americans' physical and emotional sufferings at their personal and cultural crossroads in the white-dominated modern society. According to Marcia, an individual's sense of identity is determined in large part by the explorations and commitments that he or she makes regarding certain personal and social traits ("Identity(social science)")<sup>[5]</sup>. However, since American Indians have been entangled by both complicated historical problems due to westerners' conquest and colonialism, and also suffer from many new domestic traumas on the Reservations unique to themselves, most of them couldn't manage to make a firm and rational commitment to their original ethnic characteristics and thus lack a sense of belonging.

Therefore, this essay will explore modern Native Americans' identity crisis by illustrating their symptoms, analyzing the causes and expounding on the implicit resolutions to such problems Sherman Alexie conveys through three of his best-known books, including two short story collections *Ten Little Indians* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and one semi-autobiographic young-adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

## 2. Causes of Identity Crisis

While Erikson and Marcia explored the phenomenon of identity crisis through psychological research, this paper will seek the causes of identity crisis from cultural facet. The causes of American Indians' identity crisis can be contextualized by considering historical issues as well as domestic problems on the reservations, because of the complexity and particulars of the formation of Native Americans' identities.

### 2.1. Influences of historical issues

The Native Americans' identity crisis is inevitably combined with their psychological trauma. Ever since the start of North American colonialism, the indigenous people of the North America have become a group of people dogged by misfortunes with their histories mostly written with blood and tears. In reality, the North American colonialism has brought not only those indelible pains to the "noble savage", but also some other complex issues left over by the history, which still have a considerable influence on today's Indians on the reservations. Haunted by the catastrophic and humiliating past, Native Americans often find it hard to treat their tribal history in a proper way, to affiliate themselves with the modern society off the reservation, to achieve self-development and to integrate into more advanced civilization. And that's a direct cause for their not capable of achieving harmony between their indigenous identity and their identity into the modern society.

In America, there are many ethnic groups living together, each with their own problems with their cultural identification. However, few ethnic groups would face a dilemma on what kind of attitude they should have toward the white world as contradictory as those Indians do. For example, as with the sport of basketball, which is "a game that reservation Indians love as much as urban blacks do", many Indians do perform very well in playing basketball, as can be well evidenced in many of Alexie's works. "Unfortunately, whereas blacks commonly use sports as a way out of the ghetto, Indians, though they are often as gifted, are so tied to tribal life that it is extremely rare for them to make it to college as athletes or scholars" (Grassian 74)<sup>[4]</sup>. In various ways, no matter they are on or off the reservation, many Native Americans are imprisoned to the allocated land which is parceled by the federal government forcibly through series of treaties, isolating them from the white world as well as modern development. Such geographic isolation enlarges the cultural gap between traditional Native Americans and the world outside.

Thus, from the historical point of view, those western settlers are really crucial for explaining why American Indians would suffer so much from setting up an appropriate identification in a white-dominated American society. As Daniel Grassian put in his works *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, one of Alexie's purposes is to criticize a white-dominated American history, in which there is barely any ferocious colonialization or subsequent slaughter to Native American people acknowledged by western settlers, since to mention that part would be a potential menace for forming the American national identity and arousing the national pride (8)<sup>[4]</sup>. To have a unified national identity is unquestionably significant for a multiethnic country like the U.S., which is usually quoted as a "melting pot". Nevertheless, this kind of national ideology is actually coming at the sacrifice of Native Americans' ethnic identification.

In addition, the stereotype of American Indians is normally formulated by white culture according to their own profits or points of view rather than from Indians themselves, which would naturally mislead the American public and contribute to native people's ignorance at their cultural crossroad. Consequently, the indigenous people of America are confused by what to do with their Indian identity. For example, the "lost bird" in "The Search Engine" proclaims "They wanted me to be a certain kind of Indian, and when I acted like that kind of Indian, like the Indian in my poems, those white people loved me" (42)<sup>[1]</sup>. However, when he starts to write poems for supporting himself by taking advantage of his Indian identity in the white world, he finds himself trapped by a situation that no matter what he writes, "a bunch of other Indians will hate it because it isn't Indian enough, and a bunch of white people will like it because it's Indian." The female protagonist Corliss who grew up on the reservation comforts

him by saying “I don't even know what Indian is supposed to be. How could you know?” (41)<sup>[1]</sup>. In other words, Indians both on the reservation and off the reservation are encumbered by the same problem with their ethnic and cultural identification.

## **2.2. Influences of Domestic Problems on the reservation**

The difficulty for modern American Indians of having a healthy and firm identity is not only brought by those historical problems initiated by the white colonizers, but also by Indians themselves. As we can see through Sherman Alexie's works, there are conspicuous domestic issues for them to worry about, especially the problems of poverty and alcoholism, which have been physically and emotionally devastating this group of people.

### **2.2.1. Poverty**

Poverty is one of the most frequent motifs in Sherman Alexie's works. In “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”, a story in the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Victor's father dies of heart attack off the reservation, and penniless Victor needs to fetch back his father's body in the trailer. He has no choice but to turn to the Tribal Council for help. Yet, he merely gets 100 dollars which is not even enough for a plane ticket. Victor laments “Who does have money on a reservation, except the cigarette and fireworks salespeople?” (59)<sup>[3]</sup>. Poverty is undoubtedly a widespread phenomenon for almost everyone on the reservation, and even the Tribal Council is having a difficult time financially. Poverty deters Native Americans from having a normally satisfying life as a modern citizen, and it also deprives them of keeping hopes for their future, leaving them stumbling in melancholy and desperation. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, little Junior has an accident with his Spokane teacher Mr. P, and to Junior's surprise, Mr. P forgives him for attacking him with the text book reused by many generations of Indians on the reservation. Every sober man on the reservation indeed realizes the terrible situation they are in. They start to think seriously about their pathetic circumstances and doubt themselves as well as the meaning of being a traditional Indian. Mr. P is a sensible Indian adult who has witnessed numerous Indian children and grown-ups give up themselves on the reservation. In his eyes, they all live in shame and they are all defeated. “We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child... We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture” (35)<sup>[2]</sup>. They are lacking in the necessary sense of identity to their traditional Indian culture.

### **2.2.2. Alcoholism**

In the same way as poverty does, alcoholism also plays an important role in killing Native Americans' ego identification. According to a research on American Indians' drug use norms, “[Students] who had a more intense sense of ethnic pride adhered more strongly to certain antidrug norms than those who did not” (Kulis, Napoli and Marsiglia 1)<sup>[6]</sup>. In addition to poverty, alcoholism is another element wearing down American Indians' physical and psychological health, which affects their self-identification to their own ethnic group. Most Indians have difficulties in facing both their past and present. They resort to alcoholic pass-out to evade all sorts of miserable truths, and gradually get addicted to such way to solve problems. Alcohol seems to many Indians a cure for their mental pains, but on the contrary, it backfires on them and becomes a cause for their new wound. Many deaths on the reservation can be attributed to alcoholism, for instance, in *Diary*, Junior's most beloved uncle Eugene and elder sister Mary are killed all relevant to booze. Many broken dreams also derive from alcoholism. In “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore” of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, protagonists Adrian and Victor witness how their once highly praised and most promising basketball player Julius Windmaker has in only one year turned himself from the tribe's hero on the court to a downgraded athlete throwing dumb passes, just because he has been drinking too much<sup>[3]</sup>. Indians see ballplayers as saviors; however their saviors cannot even save themselves from liquor. It's no wonder that there are more and more Native Americans losing their way in lives.

To sum up, the possible causes of Native Americans' identity crisis mainly involving the influences of historical issues and domestic problems left on these indigenous people can be well proved in Alexie's works.

### 3. Resolution of Identity Crisis

Sherman Alexie is writing his works not only to remind people of the miserable facts on the reservation, and to present how those modern Indians are tortured by ambivalence or loss of identity, but also to implicitly show ways out of the psychological trauma. In the delineation of his Indian protagonists who suffer from identity crisis, Alexie also subtly suggests a quest for self-salvation.

#### 3.1. *By Reclaiming the Importance of Indian Tradition*

In the beginning part of “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” collected in *Ten Little Indians*, the hero Jackson Jackson is typically an American Indian tramp roaming about in the city of Seattle without a sense of belonging. He grows up in Spokane, and then leaves the reservation for more than 20 years ago for college education. Although he seems to have accepted the mainstream culture in the big city, having “flunked out within two semesters, worked various blue-and bluer-collar jobs for many years, married two or three times, fathered two or three kids”, he now describes himself as “crazy”, which suggests he has failed and lost every social role either in the reservation society or in the modern society (Alexie, *Ten Little Indians* 169)<sup>[1]</sup>. At this moment, the regalia of his grandmother’s appears, ironically symbolizing the culture of Indians, while stolen and kept in a white man’s pawnshop. Immediately, the regalia works as a savior of Jackson’s lost memory and soul. After a 24-hour quest, he finally wins back the regalia.

At this time, Jackson not only has obtained a lost treasure of his grandmother’s, but also received power from it, with his thoughts detached from this world, achieving a mental harmony. The plot gives a hint to the readers that actually modern Indians could find the cure by picking up their once lost but precious traditions. As has been suggested in *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, “[The] smallest Indian cultural item or totem can be extraordinarily powerful in itself, surpassing any drug in its power” (60)<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### 3.2. *By Establishing a Hybrid Identity*

Chinese scholar Wang Fei once stated in her research on Native Americans’ quest for identity that “Native Americans’ identity is doomed to be hybrid with the hybrid culture of Native Americans’ culture and the whites’ culture. Confronted with identity crisis, some Native Americans incorporate Native Americans’ culture with the whites’ culture to reconstruct their identity” (49)<sup>[7]</sup>. Hybrid culture is a natural product of colonialism, and thus the hybrid cultural background and context give birth to Native Americans’ hybrid identity.

In *Diary*, the protagonist Junior, who is based on author himself after suffering from disdain for leaving off the reservation, finally finds a balance between the tribe and the white world. Unlike his best friend Rowdy, Junior doesn’t have a strong antipathy against the white world, which becomes the premise of his incorporating into a new group. Having been teased by some of his white classmates, his personality and talents wins their respect and friendship in the end. He also picks up confidence from his white coach.

Junior loves his white friends, and white teachers, but that doesn’t mean he absolutely regards himself as one of the white world, even though he really grows mature there and wins some compliment he would never have got on the reservation. “I would always be an outsider. And no matter how good I was, I would be an Indian” (181)<sup>[2]</sup>. He benefits from the white world and also treats it objectively. The reservation and people living on it still mean much more to him. When he helps the basketball team of Reardan beat that of Wellpinit, he feels suddenly ashamed. He loves his friend Rowdy, and feels sorry for him, and that’s also why he is so eager to prove himself in front of him.

Junior is a special character under Alexie’s description. He is a courageous one to first leave the reservation. Having survived from identity crisis between two cultures, he consequently struggles a way out. In the last two chapters of his story, he meditates on both his and other Indians’ destiny. He weeps for his tribe and those lost lives on it because of booze. He weeps because he is the only one that has broken off the doomed life on the reservation.

As a matter of fact, either by reclaiming the significance of Indian traditions or by establishing a balanced hybrid identity, as one member of this Indian group, Alexie is writing with a message of self-salvation for Native Americans. Having a hope to evoke the Indian consciousness and make some change to their stumbled lives, Alexie with his words expresses his deepest love for his Indian tribes

and compatriots.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sherman Alexie, as one of the younger generation of Native American writers, brings to light the modern indigenous people's predicament with his own specific angle of view. With the help of psychologists Erik Erikson and James Marcia's theory of Identity Crisis, readers can have a good understanding of how Native Americans on or off the reservations are struggling with their loss or confusion of self-identity through Alexie's *Ten Little Indians*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

In the three celebrated books, the indigenous people are either bound to the poor and underdeveloped reservations or tormented by getting lost under the pressure from the mainstream culture of the white-dominated society. Due to their tragic history of move or die, and their later newly-born domestic problems, American Indians incapable of establishing a healthy ego-identity are devoid of many possible ways to happiness.

It cannot be denied that Native Americans' contemporary plights are closely associated with the white settlers and even today the mainstream culture dominated by the whites still throws little limelight on this group of people who are deprived of too many things that once belonged to them. However, Alexie doesn't write in order to arouse sympathy for the native people's miseries. His works emphasize the importance of the Indian traditions and expose a way out of identity crisis by accepting a hybrid identity in the modern society. With his own experiences in the white world and his tortuous way towards his today's success, his works also express his ardent hope for a better situation of dispirited people and the declined culture at the present.

Actually, identity crisis is only one small facet of those unique pains of Native Americans, involving all kinds of troubles in Indian people's lives. Alexie, as well as many other contemporary American Indian writers, play the role of breaking the silence of Indian voices in the multi-ethnic societies and shoulder the responsibility of revealing their inner pains to the world in order to be healed.

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