

## Stylistic Interdiscursivity for Re-Configuration of Differential Native American Identity in Sherman Alexie's Poetry

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We gotta get out of here! We gotta get out of here!  
We create metaphors to compensate for what we have lost.  
Alexie

### Abstract

*Stylistic interdiscursivity is a political instrument for Alexie who has employed it not only to reconfigure Native American identity but also to challenge the Euro-American misshapen construction of the First Nations to benefit the exploitative white agenda. Alexie mixes the white discourses of history, law, politics and literature with Native American version of these discourses flouting limitations and restrictions of genres and styles for appropriation and reconstruction. His poetry readjusts the unequal power relations among the members of the American society and brings the Native American margin into the center through various stylistic devices. The very purposes of his writing – challenge, anger and offence – are dialogic in nature. He does not speak in his aloofness; he speaks to the white counterpart on behalf of his Native American community. This research explores how through stylistic interdiscursive bridging and blending Alexie's poetry disrupts the existing practices of white literary discourse as well as establishes new poetic patterns to assert Native American literary and social distinct identity. I have used 'style' not in strict sense of the use of language and prosody, textual focus on various stylistic devices; I have used style in the larger sense of patterns of difference from and negotiation with Euro-American discursivity.*

**Keywords:** *Interdiscursivity, identity, stylistics, Native Americans, Euro-American discursivity.*

### 1. Interdiscursivity and Identity

Literature is not merely a creative and imaginative exercise performed for its own aesthetics; it is a social discipline with its political agenda which is construction of "identities in practices" (Lave 1996, p. 157). Wenger claims that learning is the outcome of identity work performed through participation in communities of practice, communities "created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Lave p. 45). Although Lave's work is on learning, the observations are valid for literature as well because it is also a practice within

the community of the literary practitioners, fiction writers, poets, critics and literary theorists. It is this shared practice that transforms literature into a discourse even as this discourse legitimizes acceptable literary practices.

Hicks (1996) observes that when one enters a discourse, two processes take place: appropriation and reconstruction, the former being borrowing and mixing and the latter, the formation of a new discursive pattern. It was community contexts and constructions of racial identity that shaped nuances of literature (Ketter and Lewis 2001). Lewis and Ketter argue that "the fixed practices in which all members of a group are engaged ... create barriers to our ... dialogue" (Rogers 2011, p.128) and interdiscursivity is the result of breaking the barriers to develop a dialogue. Interaction patterns in a multicultural group sustain as well as disrupt fixed discursive practices to shape a group's identity. Terry Eagleton puts the poststructuralist stance on the relationship between language and identity: "[S]ince language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction" (Eagleton 2007, p.112). Hence, the formation of identity is a fluid process in a multicultural context and this is what necessitates stylistic interdiscursivity in Alexie. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) considers utterances dialogic in nature. A central claim of Bakhtin's approach to language is that utterances are socio-cultural constitution in which a speaker takes up the preexisting utterances and embeds them in the new. Hence, in the words of Hicks, there is "a rearticulation rather than a recapitulation of the existing discourses" (Rogers 2011, p.129). Alexie's work is dialogic in this sense: he is writing for the Native American community not in its isolated sphere but in its ever-ongoing interaction with the Euro-American multidimensional discursivity.

Fairclough's (1992) definition of interdiscursivity is the existence of the traces of one discourse embedded within another. For him, the purpose of interdiscursivity is dynamic change through rearticulation of an otherwise stable and taken for granted discourse. This point of view serves the basic purpose of discourse: change for the better in the existing situation. Wenger (1999) observes that those who enter a different community of practice normally operate on the boundaries of practices to negotiate with the conflicting discursive practices. He believes that these boundary locations are the points of production of new knowledge and transformation of identities. Alexie is a member of the community that has existed on the margins as a result of five centuries of marginalization by the Euro-American socio-political and juridical discourse. Even literary discourse has pushed Native Americans to the wall either by making them invisible or through derogatory representation. Alexie does not operate on the boundary but instead plunges directly into the heart of the EuroAmerican discourse and instead of negotiating with it, disrupts and

challenges its assumptions in order to utilize the transformative potential of hybrid discourse.

Racial issues and conflicts form the bedrock for, and mostly precondition, interdiscursivity. Racial identity is the core of the Euro-American literature concerning assertion of white identity as well as denigration of Native American identity. Hence, in Alexie's poetic discourse racial identity is bound to define the structure of interdiscursive dialogue. Scurich and Young argue that "the epistemology of racism constitutes the very conditions upon which knowledge is enacted and evaluated within dominant institutions ..." (1997). Alexie's poetry, in the light of this assertion, builds up a dialogue between two opposing racial claims and employs stylistic deviations and mixings as instruments of rearticulation and re-definition of Native American identity. Alexie's poetry is intellectual renewal of the issue of conflicting identities of white American and Native American identities and provides a structure that re-formulates critical relationships in the sense of power relationships because it is the evaluation of power relationships that makes discourse analysis critical.

The multicultural flavor of Alexie's interdiscursivity becomes an effective instrument for the production of differential racial identity and sense of tribal solidarity. Alexie's interdiscursive poetry written with multicultural sociopolitical influences helps reshape the Native American identity and challenges the Euroamerican perception of this reality conceived with bias by white discourse. His stylistic deviations foreground material and the historical forces working behind the derogatory cultural construction of the sense of self for the members of the First Nations. Style in Alexie, thus, becomes a tool for political and theoretical functioning.

## 2. Review of Literature

Interdiscursivity – bridging/blending two or more discourses – is a recurrent feature of Native American literature. Elvira Pulitano, for instance, has observed that crucial to the work of Native American critics, Greg Sarris' (Pomo-Jewish) and Louis Owens' (Choctaw-Cherokee and Irish) "is the idea of dialogue within and between people/s in order to expose boundaries and constitute different cultural and personal worlds" (2003, p.102) because they are committed to the ideas of dialogism and hybridity. Authentic and cross-cultural are two major positions in Native American academia. Paula Gunn Allen advocates the former stance and Warrior and Womack, the latter. Interdiscursivity is necessary because Native American identity, in Vizenor's expression, "embraces contradictions and oppositions rather than *retreating into separatism*" (Pulitano p.99, emphasis added). James Rupert favors a meditative strategy: "moving from one cultural tradition to another" (1995, p.9). Arnold Krupat, a non-Native critic of Native American literature, is against "essentialist positions on identity

(because these) are logically untenable" (Krupat 1996, p.10). In his essay "*The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me*", Alexie develops "An incomplete list of people whom I wish were Indian." This list of thirty three people includes Voltaire, Patsy Cline, Meryl Streep and Walt Whitman. "Isn't it at least possible to imagine that Alexie," questions Arnold Krupat, "... might produce a list ... he wished were not Indian?" The implication of the question is the negation of differential identity, i.e. Native American authors cannot (or, perhaps should not) try to establish antiessentialist position which is indeed reactionary" (p.10).

Mediation, thus, is a regular feature of Native American literature and criticism. Sarris's concept of intercultural communication is applicable to Alexie's work: Sarris observes that integrative approach collapses artificial genre barriers and artificial differences of subject and object. The meaning of the story depends upon "who is telling the story and who is listening and the specific circumstances of *exchange*" (Sarris 4). Blurring of the boundaries between genres – in addition to collapsing of socio-cultural boundaries between White Americans and Native Americans – is particularly relevant to Alexie's poetry who is conscious of the cultural boundaries necessary to "know the limits of and possibilities for understanding one another *in the exchange*" (Pulitano 2003, p.106). His diverse poetic/narrative forms and polyvocality defy western forms of genre boundaries of discourse. Expansion of vision through interaction between alternate epistemologies is, in James Rupert's expression, a meditative strategy characterized by moving "from one cultural tradition to another as well as connecting the locator to the listener" (p.9). Pulitano's rhetoric question is an insightful comment on cross-cultural nature of Native American literature: "Is contemporary Native American novelist's use of tribal material in their fiction an act of exploitation, or is it rather a significant step toward an affirmation of a *syncretic, adaptive, and dynamic* identity, a reflection of the dynamic nature of the oral tradition itself?" (p.114, emphasis added). Sarris's unique position is that of cultural mediator and so are those of Momaday, Silko and Erdrich. Interdiscursivity in Native American literature is not a new issue but it needs demonstration of how individual writers – Sherman Alexie in this case – practice it.

Emphasis on the socio-historical dimension is semantically speaking the most significant aspect of any project of interpretation of Native American literature, and Alexie is no exception. He is a conscious artist committed to indigeneity. To him, the rationale of an idea's poetic and creative relevance comes from tribalism. Alexie himself is very conscious of the role of tribal and communal roots for literature. He states explicitly: "I'm not going to speak for everybody. I'm one individual heavily influenced by my tribe. And good art doesn't come out of assimilation – it comes out of tribalism" (Berglund and Roush p.241). All

this is irrefutable spirit of Native American literature and is, therefore, a legitimate concern of Native American literary criticism.

Style, i.e. artistic manipulation of language and genre requirements, has normally received little focus. Susan Berry Bill de Ramirez in "*The Distinctive Sonority of Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Poetics*" blends the indigeneity of Alexie's poetics, i.e. the socio-cultural roots of his indigenous writing, with sound pattern. Craig Womack observes: "The evolution of a word is, at least partially, in a physical act, that of speaking, which involves air and sound and movement and vibration ... Even when we read a word, rather than hear one spoken, we imagine its sounds, imagine it being said out loud, hear a voice" (Berglund and Roush p. 108). Ramirez discussing Alexie's use of language observes that "his fascination for mathematics facilitates his episodically linked and numbered poetic structures that permit dialogically multiple voices and lenses to come together and cohere in larger conversively thematic poem" (p.108). Ramirez also observes that the "formal aspect of his work effectively forwards its progress" (p.108). Alexie's defamiliarization blends the usual and the novel in inexhaustible ingenuity although his stylistic ingenuity has received little critical attention. Ramirez' focus is on analysis, word patterns and word rhythms whereas my article takes Alexie's work as Native American discourse and its relationship with Euro-American discourse. She comments on the last two lines of his poem *The Game Between the Jews and the Indians is Tied Going Into the Bottom of the Ninth Inning*:

that we are both survivors and children  
and grandchildren of survivors.

She points out the pairing of survivors in the couplet:

Survivors	—	children
(grand)children	—	survivors

She also analyzes the sound pattern of the following lines:  
(*diiambus-amphibrach-amphibrach*)

That we are both survivors and children  
(*antispast-single beat-amphibrach*)

and grand children of survivors. (Alexie 1993, p. 80)

This article takes up the issue of interdiscursive blending for the creative assertion of identity and explores it from the point of view of interdiscursivity. I have taken the word style in the sense of how various discursive patterns,

structures and associations – like racial, communal and cultural – are manipulated, and not a pure analysis of language and poetic form (only) because “too much emphasis on poetic technique creates an uneasy detachment from Indian readers and reservation realities” (Berglund and Roush p.163).

### 3. Alexie’s Appropriation of Genre and Style

Alexie’s deviational linguistic choices serve to underline racial differences and the differential racial identity of Native Americans. Euro-American discourse had its fixed practices to create and reinforce Native American identity from the perspective of the dominant white community. Alexie’s interference into genre form is an instrument of challenge and change for the reconstruction of Native American identity in the racially charged American environment. Alexie interferes at every stylistic level: word, phrase, clause, sentence and orthography e.g. at word level he changes nouns into verbs and verbs into nouns, replaces words with cultural and historical significance: “It rained buffalo/in a wheat field/just off the reservation” (Alexie 1996, p.18).

Alexie is the literary ambassador of the Native American community towards the Euro-American whites. To create his Native American ‘place’ in the gap, he takes up various styles and genres of the established Euro-American literary discourse and re-forms them thoroughly and rather too vehemently to let them stay white in feel. The reason is that structural racism is ingrained in the Euro-American discourse and Alexie needs to develop a dialogue between two races to counter the practices that reinforce racial discrimination. Adoption of the white genres as they are would have been tantamount to the acceptance of white structures. His stylistic deviation is dynamic rearticulation of the Native American position with transformative potential of social change. He demolishes boundaries by taking up western genres and also raises boundaries to maintain the difference.

#### 3.1 Flouting of Genre Expectations for Historico-Ideological Purposes

Sherman Alexie fuses prose and poetry to demolish watertight compartmentalization of the Euro-American and Native American identities. He is not deceived by the engulfing politics of multiculturalism nor is he ready to accept displacement of the Native American community to the margin. He is essentially a man with tribal responsibility. He says that good art does not emerge from fusion into mainstream sensibility; it emerges from tribalism. The second part of *Fire Storm* announces his agenda in poetic prose:

“... [M]y sister and her husband too drunk to hear the smoke alarm, passed out in the back bedroom while the flames grew up and drew out swords. Yes. *I create cruel images for flames, give them names like Custer or Columbus.* I give fire simple

life and hate so I can assign exaggerated love and invent acts of heroism" (Alexie 1993, p.23, emphasis mine).

Custer and Columbus, for Alexie, are representatives of Euro-American sociopolitical discursivity and are placed in conflict with Native American purposes and aims.

Alexie had long been a participant in the Euro-American literary discursive practice. He bears witness to this claim in his short story *Search Engine* in the collection titled *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Here, his mouthpiece, Harlan Atwater admits that he got his training in writing from English writers. His instructor gave him the works of "white classical poets to read" (Alexie 2003, p.22). References to Meryl Streep<sup>1</sup>/Emily Dickinson/Dian Fossey/Flannery O'Connor<sup>3</sup>/John Steinbeck<sup>4</sup>/Helen Keller/Walt Whitman" (Alexie 1996, p.32) in another Alexie sonnet also confirm his roots in white literature although he never supports or strengthens the white discursive literary truth, whether it be form or content. Sometimes he is so explicit in his rejection of Euro-American discursivity. *Smoke Signals* (1998) is a highly symbolic feature film in two ways: Native roles are performed by Natives and the story is symbolic since the recovery of the ashes of the dead father is a life-long project of Alexie and synchronizes with Native American burial practices. The conversation between Victor and Thomas is very suggestive: Victor asks how many times Victor has seen *Dances with Wolves*. In his response to the question that he has seen it almost two hundred times, Victor makes fun of Thomas saying that the movie is not authentic portrayal of Indians and that he does not know how to be a real Indian: "Ha, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you? Man. Do you think that shit is real? God. Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" (Alexie 1998, p.61).

All communities share an unsaid knowledge of practices, ways of being and doing that approve certain modes of saying, writing and thinking and the others are excluded. Alexie as a writer always makes his own rules. He is an established poet and what he has written, in *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), and *One Stick Song* (2000), is taken as representative Native American poetry but it is flouting all the established rules of poetry. Sonnet, for instance, is a subgenre of English poetry with fourteen lines, with the first eight lines making an octave and the next six a sestet. Alexie flouts the formal demands of the genre to make it a sonnet and more than a sonnet. *Totem Sonnets* have been constructed essentially around the discursive principle of 'relationships' to borrow a Paul James Gee's term from his model discourse with its seven building blocks (2011). In a typically postmodernist fashion of violation of traditional structure of sonnet, *Totem*

*Sonnets* are composed only of nouns. The first two stanzas are

Meryl Streep  
Emily Dickinson  
Dian Fossey<sup>2</sup>  
Flannery O'Connor

John Steinbeck  
Helen Keller  
Walt Whitman  
Bruce Springsteen. (Alexie 1996, p.32)

The characters in this part constitute Westernism and the characters in the next part challenge the western canon of the first part:

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar<sup>5</sup>  
Zora Neale Hurston<sup>6</sup>  
Frida Kahlo<sup>7</sup>  
Pablo Nerudas  
Harriet Tubman  
Muhammad Ali. (Alexie 1996, p.32)

Dean Reader comments on Alexie's sonnet: "Alexie irrupts our expectations, composing his sonnet with fourteen prose stanzas instead of fourteen poetic lines. Each stanza is a mini-telling, mini-history" (p.134). Ramirez adds "Alexie transforms the classic lyric of Britain and Shakespeare into a vehicle that, through a love poem, speaks the history of atrocity ... [he] asserts the extent to which past horrors incapacitate their descendants, but in the concluding two lines, he integrally interweaves that tale of atrocity and trauma with the interconnected story of survivance"<sup>15</sup> (Berglund and Roush 2010, p.110).

Poetic prose is one more of Alexie's interdiscursive strategies. Consider the following extract from *On The Amtrak From Boston To New York City*:

...Tribal stories

Whose architecture is 15000 years older than the corners of the house that sits  
museumed on the hill. "Walden Pond,"  
the woman on the train asks, "Did you see Walden Pond?"

"Listen," I could have told her, "I don't give a shit  
about Walden. I know the Indians were living stories  
around that pond before Pond's grandparents were born



and before his grandparents' grandparents were born. I'm tired of hearing about Don-fucking-Henley<sup>11</sup> saving it, too,  
 ... if Don Henley's brothers and sisters  
 And mothers and fathers had not come here in the first place

Then nothing would need to be saved." (Alexie 1993, p.79)

There is no fixity of line length, no rhyme scheme – the traditional devices to give it the feel of poetry – but the division of the text into stanzas gives it orthographic/visual feel of poetry. More important, however, is the ease and spontaneity of language that is beyond the analysis of stress pattern. It is not (only) the formal pattern that makes it poetry; it is the agony that makes it poetry, more suited to Alexie's definition of poetry as multiplication of anger and imagination. Poetic prose is, thus, a subtle blending of poetry and prose, made more complicated by the addition of three more factors: history, contemporaneity and literariness. Alexie's history of "the tribal stories/ (are) ... 15000 years older/ than the corners of the house that sits/ museumed on the hill" (Alexie 1993, p.79). The blending of politico-historical and literary discourses runs throughout Alexie's poetry. In 'Year of the Indian' (Alexie 1993, p.11), he equates Jesus Christ with Crazy Horse, a Native American leader: "Jesus Christ had already come back for the second time and got crucified again? He called himself Crazy Horse and never said anything about the third attempt." Alexie has suggested that the Apocalyptic Christian dream of waiting for the prophet will not be realized unless the Native American vision is accepted.

Two hundred Native American reservations are a fact of Native American contemporary reality. According to Gallup Independent (May 5, 2004), out of 5.2 million Native Americans in the US, 22% live on reservations, in the living "conditions comparable to Third World" and 28.2% Native Americans, according to American Indians Census Facts (2008), are living below the federal poverty line. Literariness, the third category of interdiscursivity, apart from the form referred to above, comes from subtle transference from one idea to another, which can also be termed as metaphor in its broad sense of deviation – transference of one signifier to a signified other than its culturally accepted signifieds:

- i- The Indians were living stories (*First Indian* p.79).
- ii- ... the tribal stories/whose architecture is 15000 years older than the corners of the house that sits/museumed on the hill (*First Indian* p.79).
- iii- In this vision, Mary gives birth to a flame, a child that flames with its first breath of oxygen and explodes with its first taste of failure. (p.25)

- iv- Alcohol is a drum calling me. v-Here, I offer what I own: grief/like a burning bush that shouts/forgiveness and never forgives. (*First Indian* p.28)

Native Americans have been living their stories in Spokane for more than 15000 years and according to Alexie's poetic expression include all the Native Americans living in the US for a long past into the present reservation life of nightmarish misery. Alexie is also juxtaposing the enemy's version of US history with 'mine'. The lady is pointing out bits from the history of 'her country' and the protagonist of 'On the Amtrak...' only "eat(s)/ my tasteless sandwiches, (and) drink my Diet Pepsi" (p.79). To counter white history, Alexie suggests that the Native American version of history that exposes how Native Americans have been fed on processed food resulting in the highest rate of diabetes in the world.

Native American life has been an unending series of tragedies. Oliver La Farge, an anthropologist with a significant role in official policy matters on the Natives, visited the Navajo country towards the end of the 1920s and concluded: "The Indian story had to end in tragedy" (*Raw Material* 177). Alexie negates this through his comic approach towards the very serious issue of Native American survival and identity. His laughter is self-conscious and has an agenda of memory and preservative representation. He, therefore,

laughed  
at how precise  
every little pain can be laughed at the fire  
that threatened us continually  
laughed when the tribal Cop asked my father  
if he smoked  
and my father said, "Only when I'm on fire." (Alexie, *First Indian* p.22)

Tragedy and comedy are inextricably interwoven in Alexie's poetry. Sometimes laughter is in tears and vice versa and sometimes tears and sobs lie deep down into history:

"What are you giving up for Lent<sup>10</sup> this year?" Seymour asks me.  
"Catholicism," I tell him.  
And we laugh.  
"Hey," he asks. "Did you ever hear about the guy who was half-Irish and half-Indian?"  
"No," I say.  
"He owned his own bar but went out of business because he was his own best customer."  
And we laugh.

And I buy him another beer and then another. One, because he's Indian all the time, and two, because he's Irish today.  
We've got so many reasons, real and imagined, to drink.

In Alexie's cognitive network, history, irony, Christianity and Native Americanism are inseparably interwoven. Native Americans have been giving up everything since day one of their contact and now are left only Catholicism to sacrifice. It is Catholicism that has been the ideology to justify the white exploitation of the Native peoples and their continent. When the whites came to America, they had alcohol and the Natives had land; now the Natives have alcohol and the whites, land. The result of this reversal is the alcohol addiction of the Natives. The laughter in the above dialogue is the result of incorrigible damage to Native American history, also known as Native American 'soul wound'. Alexie's interdiscursivity of the treaties of the US government with Native Americans, commodity food management of the white administration for reservations poses the following question and answer:

Is alcoholism genetic or conditioned? I ask myself as I weave through another reservation maze of treaty and unrequited love, find a bottle of vodka and a box of commodity cheese at the end, call myself an ordinary victor, another victim of science and its necessary research. (Alexie, *First Indian* p.36)

#### **4. Biblical and Native American Epistemologies**

The interdiscursive blend of Biblical discourse and Euro-American white poetry blurs the boundary between the two orders of discourse for 'Nativization of the Christian discourse'. In his poem *Drum as Love, Fear, and Prayer* from *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie challenges the western claim of sole 'ownership' of Jesus Christ:

"... Jesus is still here because Jesus was once here and parts of Jesus are still floating in the air. ... Jesus's DNA is part of the collective DNA. ...we are all part of Jesus, we are all Jesus in part. ... breathe deep during all of our storms because you can sometimes taste Jesus in a good, hard rain" (1996, p.71).

Alexie not only appropriates Jesus Christ - by implication the whole of religious discourse - but also challenges the monolithic western racial binary division constructed for the marginalization of the weak: if Christ is part of 'our collective DNA', no race can claim superiority. Secondly, he incorporates Christ into the Native American lifestyle and their relationship with Nature and their being close to earth: Christ can be smelled 'during all of *our storms*' and 'in *good, hard rain*' (emphasis added). But this is not simple appropriation of Christian discourse; Alexie questions the basic signifiers of Christianity as solution to Native American crisis of civilization:

“These prayers have not been easy, how do we say Indian prayers in English and which God will answer? Is God red or white? Do these confused prayers mean we’ll live on another reservation in that country called heaven?”

The irony is that if the Native Americans embrace white God, he may send them to the Christian version of paradise, a white paradise that, for Native Americans, has proved to be reservation land that is inhospitable to American Indians.

Alexie compares Sasquatch and God, metaphors of Native American and EuroAmerican cultures respectively:

“I believe in Sasquatch just as much as I believe in God which is not logical since more people have seen Sasquatch than have seen God” (1996, p.103).

Western civilization claims to be based upon logic and still believes in God though God does not come up to the rational and empirical foundations of truth. On the other hand, Sasquatch has been seen by many Native Americans but still Sasquatch is regarded as a mythological creature. Alexie refers to the description of Sasquatch in Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition: “Sasquatch: a hairy creature like a human being reported to exist in the northwestern U.S. and western Canada and said to be a primate between 6 and 15 feet tall – called also bigfoot.” Alexie’s validation of his Native American cultural claim with a reference from a canonical work of white western discourse is also related with the history of his people: “Mystery is a series of large footprints/ leading us from the edge of the forest/to the centre of the desert” (*The Summer* 103). This mystery refers to the Sasquatch seen by people “from the edge of the forest/to the centre of the desert” at the same time referring to repeated displacements of Native Americans from the northernmost jungles to the southernmost deserts of the US. The contrast is between the physical-geographical environment of the Euro-Americans and the Native Americans. He challenges the western *rational* perspective with the tribal version of truth: “We tell these Sasquatch stories/ because we are Spokane Indians. / We are Spokane/ because our grandparents were Spokane. / Our grandparents told Sasquatch stories./ Our grandparents heard Sasquatch stories/ told by their grandparents./ In this way, we come to worship” (Alexie 1996, pp.104-105). This and other examples show Alexie’s consciousness of the conflict between Native American and scientific discourse; entities that cannot be coalesced:

“The scientists don’t want Sasquatch to exist because her existence would destroy their God” (1996, p.107).

Simply put, the acceptance of the tribal faith system as valid sign system will make western science invalid because in Alexie's opinion, the Euro-American concept of God is a plea for the domination of the western civilization. If western ideology is accepted as the only recourse to civilization, the result is Caleb Cheshamatic<sup>12</sup> who - enchained in the unbreakable chains of mental slavery acquired through education - admits whites as a panacea against the *barbarism* of his forefathers. God has been an idea most helpful to white territorial aggrandizement and expansionism. Columbus' comments on the Native Americans in his early responses to the Spanish rulers show religious connotation of the political discourse. The objectives of the political project were taken up by science which, therefore, has become a tool in 'domestic colonialism'. Mary Luis Pratt says that imposition of scientific terminology is not an objective phenomenon; it erases the existing epistemology and imposes on it the new one (Mills 2003, p.72). The signification of the Native Americans, their regions and rituals, was not a simple act of understanding; it was erasure of the local epistemology and imposition of the foreign one.

### **5. Euro-American and Native American Literary Interdiscursivity**

Alexie's literary discourse is disruptive in that it does not follow usual poetic patterns but creates new modes of expression. The practices produced are also disruptive: Native Americans' multiplication from one still Indian body to multitudes in response to Whitman's *Song of Myself* is an *activity*, suggesting conflict between two different institutionalized practices: i.e. Euro-American literary discursive practice and Native American familial efforts at preservation of race through procreation, big families of as many children as possible through conceptions, multi-marriages and adoptions of children as a family practice in response to sociopolitical and colonial repressive and annihilating practices of Whitman's community. Whitman's work glorifies the human body (specifically the Euro-American body and excluding the Native American, of course), democracy and individualism while for the Native Americans, survival is the issue because of the fast declining Native American population. Louise Erdrich observes in *Tracks*: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall" (Erdrich 1). The Native chief Salith referred to the devastated Native population in his written and oral response to the 14<sup>th</sup> US president Franklin's message for the purchase of their land to expand Washington City: "It is of no importance where we shall pass the rest of our days and they are not many. A few more moments, a few more days, some more cold and some more winters, and none of the children of the great tribes will be left behind to give the impression that we never lived on this earth" (Laghari, *The Jang* 16 Dec. 2012, p.4). In this socio-historical context, the subject reevaluates the white canonical author Walt Whitman from the Native American perspective and presents the Native American view of white values.

Places and things are parts of discourse because no discourse can exist in space. Joy N. Scott Momaday rightly observes that “things *takeplace*”: “The place of immense possibility is where the storyteller belongs” (1997, p.112). Alexie keeps Native American places and things side by side. This interdiscursivity is more a questioning and challenging of dominant white discourse:

“New Year’s Eve, out with my girlfriend and ten other friends, everybody white except me. We were all in the pizza place in Reardan, just off the reservation, and when the door opened and this Indian stranger walked in, just blasted, and sat at the counter. He gave me a nod and smiled, one Indian to another” (Alexie, *First Indian* 11, emphasis mine).

Reservations are the American systematic marginalization of Native Americans from mainstream society but Alexie places the reservation and pizza side by side and, suggests that of all the company, he, a Native American, has a place of his own.

## 6. Deviant Mixing of Poetry and Prose, Personal and Political/Cultural

Both *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* employ first person singular ‘I’ throughout the text. This ‘I’ is more than personal. First, the Native Americans do not perceive the individual as the Euro-Americans do. For the Natives autobiography is not a valid genre; they can use it only so far as it can suggest their communitism.<sup>13</sup>The personal ‘I’ is in fact a communal collective pronoun. Alexie’s use of first person, therefore, is all inclusive for his community: this ‘I’ extends from the first person’s individuality to the Spokane region and the people and then to all the First Nations of America victimized by the American juridco-political discourse. Alexie in *First Indian on the Moon* writes:

“I was a fisherman for 15,000 years before you stumbled onto my shore your legs sea-heavy and awkward.

Do you remember?

How strange to know corn saved your life but it’s always the simple gifts that matter most” (1993, p.64).

So when I give a can of commodity corn instead of a dozen roses it doesn’t mean I don’t love you it means I want to save you from hunger, disease, the long winter. (1993, p.64)

This dialogic extract from “Seven Love Songs Which Include the Collected History of the United States of America” from *First Indian on the Moon* (1993) is a

statement on the relationship between the First Nations (Native Americans) and the first invaders and by implication all the Euro-Americans. Euro-American politico-cultural discourse has misrepresented Native Americans as 'primitive and uncivilized' (Early 1998; Jaimes 1992; Pulitano 2003; Laghari 2012) and, therefore, the relationship between them has never been a respectable one. The Native American first person singular offers the Euro-American second person singular to redefine the history and Native American contribution to white survival in America.

Following are some examples of the use of

'T A) *First Indian on the Moon* (1993):

- 1) This is about the stories / I told my sisters. (p.9)
- 2) I am also a healer, a woman reserves her touch for larger things. (p.15)
- 3) I just want/ to be done / with fire /and flame and ash. (p.22)
- 4) I am in a Breakaway Bar drinking with a few of my friends when my dad walks in with a few of his friends. (p.35)
- 5) ... and I can hold you / with these hands / that held the spear, / that still hold the tribe.

B) *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996):

- 1) I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall after an Indian woman puts her shoulder to the Grand Coulee Dam and topples it ... I am told by many of you that I should forgive and so I shall when I am dancing with my tribe during the powwow at the end of the world. (p.97)
- 2) There is a grave on the Spokane Indian Reservation / where my sister is buried. I can take you there. (p.55)
- 3) ... and I want to hide beneath old blankets .../and I want/ to play a drum. (p.72)

Orthographic deviation in Alexie is also used occasionally. In *Genetics* he mixes prose and poetry though this poetry is more of a poetic prose. The poem has five stanzas of poetry and four passages of poetic prose: Fire follows my family each spark each flame a soldier in the U.S. Cavalry First it was the fire in 1973. Flames dropped from the attic of our old house and burned every quilt we owned. Cousins and neighbors came from miles away to carry furniture, clothes, our smallest possessions from the house, but they all arrived too late to save much. (Alexie, *First Indian* 21)

The stanza written orthographically in the form of a flame, symbolizes the flames that have been following the Alexies, and by implication all Native Americans, throughout their post-Columbian history of drinking alcohol, a habit planted in

them by white fur traders. It is a very personal experience for the Alexie family but, the first person singular associates the fire with the political force and the US army.

Repetition with orthographic variations, not deviation, is a regular feature of Alexie's poetry. It serves to strengthen and reinforce the poetic claim:

The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head.  
 The fire crowned the trees above my head. (Alexie 1993, pp.23-25)

Alexie names and renames the fire and flames to assert the sufferings of the Native Americans and to raise the meanings of fire to inter-racial relations of Native Americans and Euro-Americans. In *Fire Storm*, he mixes stanzas of poetry and passages of poetic prose. Renaming the flames serves to bring out the Native American discursive truth of Native American history. M. Annette Jaimes observes that the naming is not an innocent phenomenon but is ideologically inspired (p.5). Alexie consistently mixes socio-political rituals with Native American mythological figures and rituals, the former to expose and the latter to counter. In the seventh verse passage of "*Year of the Indian*" (Alexie, *First Indian* 11) Alexie offers the Indian perspective of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Independence Day of America: "... the air is heavy with smoke and whiskey. I find Tyrone passed out in the dumpster behind the Trading Post." The celebration of Independence Day with whiskey and fireworks makes the environment too heavy for Indians to breathe. The Indians on the reservation get "alcohol and commodity food" that makes them still heavier, too heavy to be lifted with any leverage, if one passes out. The agony of reservation life is countered by Alexie through communication with the mythical figure of Coyote<sup>14</sup> in many Native American cultures, a representative of pre-Columbian Native cultures: "And last night, after everyone had gone on home, I stood naked on my front porch and howled like an old coyote and the old coyotes, beautiful and crazy, howled right back" (Alexie 1993, p.13).

## 7. Conclusion

Interdiscursivity is an essential condition of expression in contemporary US being, in Rosaldo's terms, a confluence of "multiple overlapping communities" (p.194).

Alexie in *The Summer of Black Widows* and *First Indian on the Moon* not only produces a discursive conflict but also bridges the gap between Native



Americans and Euro-Americans. Instead of internalizing the Euro-American epistemological position, Alexie interferes into the accepted white literary traditions and stylistics and imposes his Nativized creative perspective on traditional poetic assumptions. Alexie's dialogic poetry blends the two conflicting discourses of Euro-American literature and Native American literature but keeps the tilt towards the establishment of Native American literary canon for rearticulation of the Native American identity. For this purpose he flouts the accepted standards of genre and style of the poetry.

Alexie's interdiscursivity has received mixed response from Native American critics. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn wants "Alexie to be more essentialist (supporting a purer vision of Native peoples, a pure blood version) while Hafen would like him to be less essentialist" (Lundquist 2004, p. 164). I second Hafen's approach. Chess, a devout Catholic in *Smoke Signals*, comments on Catholicism: "The church does have a lot to atone for." Thomas rehearses the massacre at Wounded Knee and Chess responds: "Don't you understand that God didn't kill any of us? ... Jesus didn't kill any of us." "But they allowed it to happen, enit?" retorts Thomas. Chess retorts again concerning human responsibility: "They [God and Christ] didn't allow it to happen. It just happened. Those soldiers made the choice. The government made the choice. That's free will, Thomas" (Alexie 1998, p.168). Alexie thus has balanced acceptance and rejection of Christianity, responsibility of religion and government, divinity and humanity implying that religion exists at "interesting crossroads" (Lundquist 2004, p.164). Native American writers are bound to think interdiscursively. Thomas King, Louis Owens, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich, all "take on the implications of multiculturalism in the postcolonial movement" (Lundquist 2004, p.171). Myriad bloodlines and varied cultural paradigms are bound to result in interdiscursivity and this makes essentialism neither possible, nor desirable. Alexie's interdiscursivity is assertion and retrieval of Native American identity which is possible only in interaction with conflicting discourses, not in isolation.

For ease of analysis and to make this research article doable, I have parsed various stylistic elements of Alexie's interdiscursive expression but all is harmoniously and inseparably interwoven throughout his poetry: mixing of comedy and tragedy, of Euro-American and Native American histories and literary expression with contemporary life of reservations, combination of prose and poetry, shuffling of signifiers and signifieds:

I ran into the house on fire and saved my version of God.  
 I ran into the house on fire and saved my Adam and Eve.  
 I ran into the house on fire and saved my porcupine quill.  
 I ran into the house on fire and saved my last will and testament.  
 I ran into the house on fire and saved my metamorphic rock.

I ran into the house on fire and saved my basketball.

I ran into the house on fire and saved my book about Sasquatch. (Alexie 1996, p.106)

### Notes

- 1) Meryl Streep is an award-winning American actress renowned for musicals, comedies and dramas. Among many honors, she also won the Academy Award for Best Actress, five New York Film Critics Circle Awards, AFI Life Achievement Award (2004) and recently the National Medal of Arts (2010) awarded by Barack Obama. *The Deer Hunter Adaptation, Mamma Mia! And Doubt* are her famous films.
- 2) Dian Fossey (1932-1985) was an American zoologist who worked on guerilla groups for 18 years on daily basis in the mountainous jungles of Rwanda.
- 3) Flannery O'Connor was a prominent American author. Her two novels and 32 short stories reflect Southern Gothic style, Southern regional settings and Roman Catholic faith. She received 1972 National Book Award for fiction for her *Complete Stories*.
- 4) John Steinbeck (1902-1968) won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for the *Grapes of Wrath*. Collectively they constitute the Euro-American identity.
- 5) Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is a black retired American basketball player. He was a record 6-time NBA MVP (National Basketball Association Most Valuable Player) and got many honors and awards like that. At age 24, he adopted the Muslim name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar after winning the first NBA Championship in 1971. He was a basketball coach, an actor and a best-selling author.
- 6) Zora Neale Hurston was a black American anthropologist, folklorist and author best known for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She fought for educational, political and cultural rights of the Africans Americans.
- 7) Farida Kahlo was a Mexican painter best known for self-portraits. She says that she paints herself because she is often alone and she is the subject she knows best.
- 8) Pablo Neruda is a renowned Chilean poet-diplomat. Harold Bloom in his *Western Canon* included him in 26 authors central to western tradition. A leftwing intellectual, he admired Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union for idealist theoretical Marxist doctrine. Hence all these personalities and their works constitute a defense of the marginalized identities. Placing their names together in a stanza of a sonnet implies collection of countering names to pose a grand gesture of challenge to the pseudo-single overarching white-American identity. Reproduction of discursive ideology is embedded in

interaction, and institutional and organizational context. The characters referred to above are related to the Native Americans directly or indirectly. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is directly related with American Indians for basketball. Zora Neale Hurston like Native authors has been intellectually struggling for her marginalized black community. Farida Kahlo has been constructing her own subjectivity through painting as the Native authors have been doing for their community through writing. Pablo Neruda reconstructed the ancient American pre-Columbian past as a resistant anti-colonial strategy in his epical Canto and other writings. The shared ideologies provide the rationale for the placement of all of them into a single stanza suggesting an organizational unity interacting together.

- 9) Crazy Horse (Lakota: *Tašú ke Witkó* in Standard Lakota Orthography, literally "His-Horse-Is-Crazy"; ca. 1840 – September 5, 1877) was a Native American war leader of the Oglala Lakota. He took up arms against the U.S. Federal government to fight against encroachments on the territories and way of life of the Lakota people, including leading a war party to victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in June 1876.
- 10) Lent is, the period of 40 fast days and Sundays, the time when Christians prepare for Easter, the greatest of the Christian festivals, by thinking of the wrongs they have done. On Lent is some Christians try to overcome their faults because they believe that it was man's sin for which Jesus was crucified. Some Christians try to follow the example of Jesus in the desert: they give up luxuries to practice self-discipline and devote more time to prayer to really let God into their lives. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, Lent lasts for six and a half weeks. It ends at Easter when Christians remember the execution of Jesus and then celebrate his rising from death. The last week of Lent begins with Palm Sunday, which celebrates the day Jesus entered Jerusalem and the people lay down palms at his feet. The last day of Lent is Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday, also known as Easter Day.
- 11) Don Henley, American rock musician, raised almost \$4 million to save the land surrounding Walden Pond from development. The practical implication is the attempt to acquire 68.5 acres of land in historic Walden Woods. Alexie's abusive-poetic expression comes from sense of belief true ownership of the Native American lands and resources which are only either captured or depleted in the name of preservation. Alexie also questions the preservation politics that transforms the Indians into a community and culture of bygone era that needs preservation artificially, the stance that favors the white imperialist agenda concerning the Native Americans.
- 12) Caleb Cheshamatic was the only Indian in the class of 1665 in Harvard's Indian College, one of the earliest British academic institutions in America. He was one of the promising proselytes "who could later propagate the

- gospel as well as European civilization among their tribes" (see Helen Jaskoski 1996).
- 13) Communitism: In *That the People Might Live: Native American and Community and Native American Community* (1997), Jace Weaver observes that the single thing that most defines American Indian literatures relates to a sense of community and commitment to it. He terms this phenomenon "communitism" which blends the words community and activism.
  - 14) Coyote - also known as brush wolf, the American wolf and the prairie wolf - is a recurring symbol in Native American literature. Coyote is a mythical figure common to many Native American cultures and mythologies. For stealing fire from gods to give it to mankind, it is comparable to Prometheus and the Scandinavian Loki. He wanted love and wife from his tribes, the Spokane, the Coeur d'Alene, the Palouse settled along the Spokane River but he could not get love and a wife. Therefore he stands alone and angry. The relationship between the Native Americans and coyote (an animal implying animal kingdom in general) is horizontal with an equal relationship with mankind.
  - 15) Gerald Vizenor, Anishnaabe writer and scholar, coined the term 'survivance' blended from survival and endurance. He takes verbal expression, whether active or passive, as evidence of human survivance. "performance and human silence [both] are strategies of human survivance" (see Vizenor, 1994, p. 16).

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