

Trickster Figure in the Contemporary Native American Literature: A Reading of Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

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Abstract

The trickster figures portray cleverness, knowledge, power, and also become the ancestral figure for the Native Americans by keeping the community connected through the medium of songs, myths and folktales. A trickster's role is to transgress the rules of the society by turning them upside down and protects its people from the danger to be-fall. Wherein the same trickster figure also departs his elder traditional knowledge to his community to keep them connected to their roots. Therefore, performing the role of both a trickster and an ancestor for the community. This paper revolves around a thorough understanding as well as analysis of Sherman Alexie's works, his collection of short stories and the film. Alexie's attempt to revisit the past and preserve the tradition for the future generation.

Keywords- *Trickster, Coyote, Stories, Community, Culture, Tradition*

Introduction

S.E. Schlosser defines trickster as, "A Trickster is a mischievous or a roguish figure in myth or folklore who typically makes up for physical weakness with cunning and subversive humor. The Trickster alternates between cleverness and stupidity, kindness and cruelty, deceiver and deceived, breaker of taboos and creator of culture." In folk tales where the presence of the trickster figures is significant, are figures generally of animals with human traits, also are God- like figures. Animals who are known for their ability to explore new territories and to fit in wherever urban and wild both the environment like coyote, raven, dragon fly, racoon and spider are chosen as a trickster figure in Native American oral tradition.

The coyote is the oldest established Native American Trickster figure and a significant symbol in its culture and oral tradition. The coyote is seen in all the myths, legends and stories of Native American tribes, known for his crafty intelligence and covertness. The word "coyote" is, however, a Spanish alteration of the Nahuatl (Aztec) word for the animal, *coyotl*. The same folktale narrated by storytellers may differ from tribes to tribes according to their culture and values, and similarly, with a number of tribes the function and importance of the trickster figures also varies. In some of the tribes' myths and folktales coyote is a valued and respected culture hero who creates, teaches, and helps humans, while in some other tribe, he plays the role of an anti-hero, an epitome of negativity like greed, selfishness and arrogance. The coyote is also functions the character of a comic trickster, whose lack of wisdom gets him into trouble while his cleverness gets him escape. Furthermore, the coyote is even present in combination of all three characteristics in one folktale. A trickster figure controls / regulates the world we live in, not an ideal but a real world. The good and negative traits they possess reflect upon the idea of life according to Native Americans, who believe life is a mix of bad and good. They are considered as culture heroes because they benefit the community in one or the other way. The tale of coyote as trickster serves many purposes in the life of people, his unpredictable characteristics are always connected to the community's experiences of handling unpredictable surroundings one after the other. People learn about their own weakness and foolishness, and to learn to laugh at themselves by accepting and improving by their occasional acts of self-deception.

Moving with the pace of modernity, Sherman Alexie, Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr. (October 7, 1966), grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, is a poet and a writer. In his writings, he embeds his personal experiences as a Native American, his growing up on reservation along with ancestry of several tribes. His collection of twenty two interconnected short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) became popular largely, further he got inspired to direct a film *Smoke*

Signals (1998) which is based on this collection. A collection of stories with recurring characters Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds – the- Fire, who are two young Native Americans living on the Spokane Indian Reservation. The stories narrate the entire life history, their relationships with the family members and the others who live on the reservation. These twenty two stories are narrated through the medium of flashbacks, dream sequence, storytelling, surreal images and diary entries. Alexie through his writings informs that the reservation is just not the experience that Native American claims to have suffered, but it's the effect on their identity and culture that is present even in the absence of reservation with present multicultural society.

Borrowing the role played by trickster in oral tradition who teaches a lesson, Alexie uses humor as a method to approach/ bring into light the difficult issues residual in the society alcoholism and poverty. Through his collection of stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie himself plays the role of a trickster for the society, as he challenges on the language conventions and stereotypes, through presenting a trickster figure in his works. He depicts the history of despair, deprivation and racial discrimination of being Native American- from a Reservation and how one tries to maintain once tribal identity to survive in White society.

Thomas Builds -the –Fire is one of the trickster figure in this story collection that is represented similarly to coyote. The trickster is considered to be one of the oldest mythological figures in the Native American oral tradition. Thomas Build- the- fire is the man who obliges to the community needs and acts as a teaching aid that contributes to the benefit of culture to survive. Thomas Build- the – Fire is present in the three stories ‘ A Drug Called Tradition’, ‘This is What it Means Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona’ and ‘ The Trail of Thomas Builds- The- Fire’. Thomas, who is shown alone without a companionship and also inferior to others in physical strength but is indestructible like a coyote. As he is the only one who survived when his house sets on fire and his parents died. He even faces the humiliation and beatings from his coequals, and the rejection he suffers for being an Indian whenever he leaves the reservation. A trickster is known for teaching lessons majorly through stories, similarly Thomas Build –the –Fire narrates the stories that confronts with Euro- American version of both past and present. Thomas Build- the- Fire inherits the story telling ability, as his grandfather, Samuel Builds- the- Fire is bestowed with the talent of narrating the story spontaneously. Although, Thomas Builds- the- fire is never appreciated his story telling feature and is always ridiculed. For him these stories mark an important connection with his family as he remarks,

We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as

long as I continue to tell the stories. My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years. My mother, she died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her. She pushed me out into the world with her last breath. I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories which came to me before I even had words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do. (Alexie 72)

The role of Thomas of a storyteller gets erased on his reservation; he is not portrayed as a warrior or savage, but a child whose childhood and adult life is full of atrocities, and without a companion. In one of his recollection of story Thomas narrates, "They hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody, had dreams about flying. Thomas flew. . . . One of his dreams came true for just a second, just enough to make it real." (Alexie 70) Thomas breaks his arm and is made fun of by other students, who are jealous however. The courage of a trickster that Thomas possesses, influences him to make an attempt and bring his childish dream into reality and gain something that other student cannot. Towards the begging of the life of Thomas and Victor both could relate to stories of brave Indians. But eventually, with time, only Thomas is the one who is still connected to the tradition, storytelling beliefs and does not get corrupted by White's influence. Thomas always remained victorious in his path of storytelling and his connection with the roots, while other students were defeated because of them falling into assimilation.

Only at the time of Victor's father's death, the importance of Thomas's stories is understood by him at first. Earlier each and every person considered Thomas as abnormal rather than realizing the fact that his stories can teach them great lessons, just like the stories of coyote. Alexie uses Thomas to depict and confront the ridiculous notions of Indian representation. Again, as a subverting storyteller Thomas falls into a flashback to the summer when natives were celebrating the Fourth of July and Victor asks Thomas to tell him a story. Thomas closed his eyes and narrated,

There were these two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All the horses were gone. So the two Indian boys stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation. When they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents' eyes shone with pride. You were very brave, everybody said to the two Indian boys. Very brave. ("Alexie 63)

Through this incident Alexie marks comment on the situation of Indian reservation life, as he points out the inability of the boys to be warriors turns them to commit a crime. Storytelling for Thomas is a medium to communicate the importance of one's tradition and tribal identity, the

communal ties, the dreams, and the hope which are getting erased by the influence of White and thus no more believing in the above. Similar to many other natives who are suffering from poverty and alcoholism, Victor also goes through the same. Alcohol implies the influence of Whites that is afflicting Native American slowly leaving them with their broken dreams, losing of their real traditional identities, without which one cannot fly. But with the help of Thomas stories he finds an alternative in the traditional message to take care of one another and thus started to understand the significance of the traditional identities.

The first story “A Drug Called Tradition” talks about the tradition of taking drugs according to Victor and Junior. The role of Thomas, of a storyteller begins from this story. Along with Victor and Junior, Thomas too intakes drugs and begins narrating the story, to which Victor does not believe during this story it brings back the tradition of dancing. The tradition which was meant only for Native Americans, and does not involve White men. “Then the boys sing. They sing and dance and drum. They steal horses. I can see them. They steal horses” (Alexie 21). Native Americans keep their glories as victors instead of as victims. Here, Thomas brings the past which was fictional to the present reality, as it depicts the characters at the present moment, regaining their proud Indian way of life untainted with alcohol or drug intake. Thomas emphasizes on the fact that one must be aware and feel proud to carry one’s original Native American identity, rather than a stereotypical identity. Victor and Junior throw away the bottles, thus portrays success of Thomas’s story which convinced them for their rebirth of tradition identity.

In the story ‘The Trail of Thomas Builds- The- Fire’ where Thomas plays the larger role is on a trail on the charge of two murders. Judge asks him to proceed with his testimony, where he narrates four stories. Here, Thomas performs both as the protagonist and the story itself, as like a trickster Thomas builds on cross cultural references, stereotype and humor. The trail of Thomas can be seen as a trial against the belief in the power of storytelling. “Builds-the-Fire has a history of this kind of behavior [...] A storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth. Dangerous” (Alexie 93). While the BIA members were planning to accuse him of various charges, Thomas knew of what crime was he actually guilty of. Along with the storyteller being on trial, Alexie also depicts the hopelessness of the social situation of the Native Americans. The response marked towards Thomas as ‘dangerous’ signifies the threat among the people of criticizing the society. Thomas’s stories are not even accepted in the court room, denial of his stories represents the denial of the history through his eyes. Represented as a trickster Alexie disguises the criticism in humor, and who interprets the past through the stories of Thomas, that travels between history and myth, Natives version and Euro-American version of the stories.

In his first story he narrates himself as a pony who was taken captive and transported to Walla Walla valley. The story is set for Sept 8, 1855, and narrates how hundreds of captured ponies were being killed. The motive behind the story as a tragedy was to gain sympathy of the people present in the courtroom as he tricks them for a pony as Native Americans. During the description of the slaughter of the hundred of horses, many of the people present in court room fell into the trap. “Most of the Indians in the courtroom wept and wanted to admit defeat” (98) His successful attempt to gather the emotional support towards his remarks to the beginning of the story where his story telling was considered as dangerous. It proves the power that lies in storytelling (while Thomas was considered as abnormal) that Thomas is dangerous, not only to the “white” American system, but also for many Native Americans.

“A new story was raised from the ash of older stories” (Alexie 98), therefore, Thomas closed his eyes and narrated another story in the flashback, and represented himself as a warrior named Qualchan. This story comments on the false promises made by White men to Native Americans, moreover, killing of them. The story again raised awareness among the people regarding their self pride, community pride, willingness and confidence to regain their Native American cultural identity and heritage of the people in the reservation. Thomas portrays the importance of storytelling, because of which he was shunned in the community that it is through the stories one is connected to its past cultural identity of the community and one’s family. Thomas focuses on the acceptance and recognition of the past, and also signifies that through storytelling the culture can be preserved to pass on to the next generation. After he is charged for imprisonment and is made to sit in the bus, still the power of storytelling is recognized by the other prisoners: “You’re that storyteller. Tell us some stories, chief” (Alexie 103).

No matter how long the officials’ tried to control and erase the truth with the help of stereotype, but the power of storytelling brings back the ill- treated Indian identities as proud warriors. Thomas’s attempts to glorify storytelling are a medium to shed the vision of oppression and the stereotypes, and to achieve the lost traditional ideals, further to preserve them for the generations to come. Native Americans were trapped in the white structured culture falling into self- fulfilling stereotypical image, but Thomas through his story telling, believes to change and retaliate against the troubles and gain the real Native American past and present.

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