

Invincible Positivism as Motto: A Study of Sherman Alexie's Resilient Women Icons from Select Works

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Abstract

Author Sherman Alexie's fictional Spokane community is the exact replica of the real Spokane Indian community of the US, whose inhabitants are victims of intergenerational trauma due to their genocidal past. Sherman Alexie, the cultural insider honestly captures his dysfunctional community in all his works irrespective of genre. His subaltern protagonists are mostly victims due to the lack of resilience such as determination, perseverance and positivism at adverse situations. The author who is also aware of his responsibility towards his community creates certain resilient characters who amidst failure and dysfunction emerge out to be successful role models for their community. The prime objective of this paper is to study the two main women iconic characters of Alexie, namely Marie Polatkin, of the novel, Indian Killer and Corliss of the short story "The Search Engine" who are prepared to meet the challenges of the subaltern's life, in the pursuit of success with their invincible positivism.

Keywords: resilience, positivism, subaltern, Spokane, adverse

The two resilient fictional characters Marie Polatkin and Corliss are indigenous young women who belong to the Spokane community one of the five hundred and odd federally recognised Native tribes of United States. It is a well-known fact that the American Indian communities have lost their native land, language, culture, religion and spirituality as a result of colonization. The Spokane reservation is also plagued by social problems like acute poverty, alcoholism and substance abuse, violence, illiteracy, unemployment, racism and lack of opportunities. They are victims of genocide and carry the additional burden of historical trauma and therefore prone to psychological adversity of higher level of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, nightmares and guilt behaviour. Hence these two young Native American Indian women need to be equipped with amazing level of protective factors to fight against the risk factors that are present from within and without. Marie the female protagonist of Indian Killer and Corliss, the female protagonists of "The Search Engine", possess both resistance and resilience to make successful attempts to redefinethemselves in the world outside their Spokane reservation, that has only assigned them a subordinate role to play.

Marie is the revolutionary of all characters of Alexie, beyond gender variations. She is a student of Washington State University enrolled in Native American Literature. She is identified as bright and smart from her childhood and her parents “knew their bright daughter belonged in that larger world” (IK 33) and educate her in English. Bright kids in reservation schools are severely tackled to give up their ambition and hope by the reservation school teachers who are whites. On the other hand, academically bright kids “endured constant bullying and taunting” (IK 34) from their own peer group too. Racism an additional, inescapable risk factor for Native youth acts like a double edged sword, where the racist attitude of their own community is placed in one end and the racism of the mainstream white world outside take the other end.

Marie is modelled after Yakima’s war chief Qualchan’s wife. She is a “contemporary version of a female warrior”, (Hollrah 162) who protests with passion and devotion for the cause of Indians. Right from her childhood Marie is not ready to accept failure and defeat but she rebels and retaliates to her enemies. “Marie fought fiercely, without control or thought. She tackled people, bit and pinched, spat and kicked. She refused to accept beating. She always wanted revenge and would wait until the perfect moment, which could be months later, to ambush her enemies” (IK 34). Marie desires to escape the maelstrom of her reservation which she fears “would pull her back and drown her in its rivers” (IK 34). “Through her intelligence and dedication” (IK 34) to her studies, she manages to be enrolled in Washington State University and finds an escape to the world outside her dysfunctional Spokane Indian reservation.

Corliss, another reservation young lady dreams of “a maximum life, an original aboriginal life” (Blasphemy 362). Back in her reservation, in her school days as a poor student, she manages to thrive in her education with the help of her teachers: “Indians and good white people whose whiteness and goodness blended and separated” (Blasphemy 363). Corliss could not imagine a reservation life forever which she considers as nothing more than “to confirm Indian fears and insecurities” (Blasphemy 368). She feels “Over the last two centuries, Indians

had learned how to stand in lines for food, love, hope, sex and dreams, but they didn’t know how to step away” (Blasphemy 368). Her family and relatives who know Corliss is bright and smart believes that she “is going to save [their] tribe” (Blasphemy 374).

She is more interested in poems and literature than in maths, science and politics that her family wants her to study. But, Corliss shapes and determines her future by herself and strongly resists her family’s opinion. She wonders, “How can you live a special life without constantly interrogating it? How can you live a good life without good poetry?” (Blasphemy 371). She loves her family and her extended family members for their constant support for college education but when it comes to her father and uncles, the male members of her family, she hates them for their “endless nostalgia and quick tempers” (Blasphemy 371) and also she hates their “individual fears and collective lack of ambition” (Blasphemy 371). She fears they have been instructed to pick up a wrench by authorities and never have thought of why not a pencil or a pen, and she hates their lack of indiscriminative power and their weakness. Corliss who considers herself “eccentric and powerful and great” and is “rarely found comfort from her family and friends and never from God, but continued to want it and never stopped asking for it” (Blasphemy 373).

Marie Polatkin, and Corliss are undoubtedly resilient because they are not suppressed by the many risk factor of their community. They are potential enough to bounce back to life that redeems them from their socio-cultural, political and psychological death traps which always hold their community’s foot wedged in their traumatic past. They have sprung back to life in spite of a highly adverse environment to which they belong to. They are intelligent, creative, quiet optimistic, introspective and retrospective to analyse the demerits of their community and to find a way out of their reservation maelstrom. A clear determination for self-definition and self-representation combined with intelligence and love for literacy like Arnold Sprits, the young-adult protagonist of *The Absolutely True Diary Of A Part-Time Indian*, sets these women protagonists apart from the rest of their community members.

Marie Polatkin, and Corliss make use of their

protective factors like personal traits and the environmental protective factors like their parents, extended family, teachers and friends support to redefine their individual identity and thereby they resist the imposed stereotyped identity. The all-time protesting protagonist Marie of Indian Killer is known for her resistance and protest ceremonies inside and outside the university in which she is enrolled in Native American literature. Marie confronts and resists racism and stereotypes and mythologizing of Native culture by actively challenging her professor Dr. Marther, and the faculty Head by highlighting the discrepancies in the course curriculum and the teachers handling the course. Her main reason to enrol in the Native American Literature class is “to challenge Dr. Marther’s role as the official dispenser of Indian education at the university” (IK 58). Dr. Marther is a “white man who wanted to be Indian” (IK 58). He is another whiteman like Jack Wilson who is attracted by falsified images of Indians and Indianness. Marie, a Spokane Indian, cultural insider constantly challenges the romanticized philosophies of Dr. Marther. She finds an “Emotional outlet in the opportunity to harass a white professor who thought he knew what it meant to be Indian” (IK 64). She aggressively confronts Dr. Marther’s knowledge: “You think you know more about being Indian than Indians do, don’t you? Just because you read all those books about Indians, most of them written by white people” (IK 247). Marie subverts his role of authority and resists “the idea of a knowledge hierarchy, one where dominant mainstream learning is considered more valuable than others” (Hollrah 163).

Marie is very well aware that she is “protesting this, protesting that” (IK 265). She protests against imposers like Dr. Marther and Jack Wilson. She points out the flaws in the curriculum of her course and questions Dr. Faulkner, the Head of the Department, “Why isn’t an Indian teaching the class?” (IK 312). She argues that a chemistry course, is handled by a chemist, Women’s Literature is taught by women and African-American teacher teach African-American Literature and why not real Native Indian teachers are allowed to handle genuine Native American Literature in the University? Alexie uses Marie, the cultural insider, to establish that white writers,

who believe they understand the lives of American Indians and, write about Indians, perpetuate the colonizing act of misleading the reading public about Indians and their culture.

Corliss considers college to be an “extreme sport for an Indian woman” (Blasphemy 390). It is the inherent racism that is all pervasive in the white world. Racism is the hugerisk factor for indigenous youth:

College was an extreme sport for an Indian woman. Maybe ESPN2 should send a camera crew to cover her academic career. Maybe she should be awarded gold medals for taking American history and not shooting everybody during the hour and a half in which they covered five hundred years of Indian history. If pushed, Corliss knew she could go crazy. She was paranoid schizophrenic in waiting. Maybe all the crazy homeless Indians were former college students who’d heard about manifest destiny one too many times. (Blasphemy 390)

The everyday helpless destiny of a Native, who is well aware of the real racist history of the U.S. nation building myth, has the potency to make him crazy or schizophrenic. So, it is quite understandable that it is not only racial discrimination and marginalization that has deprived them of opportunities but racism inherent in, right from the nation building myth to the racism internalised in the academic arena too proves to be a great threat to the Native youngsters. The immense courage to withstand and sustain such false propagandas is essential in order to acquire the white man’s education that could help them about rehabilitation and rejuvenation to their community.

The intensity of racism in the Natives’ life is a major threat that holds back the bright youngsters of the community from bringing rehabilitation to their community. This is evident when the anxious and worried mother of John Smith, the protagonist of the Indian Killer, warns John, who is about to leave the reservation for the city to pursue his pre-medicine education: “They’re going to try to stop you. They’re going to try to humiliate you. They’re going to call you names. They’ll want you fail” (IK 292). It threatens them as an unconquerable demon in the path of progress. Marie and Corliss are unable to escape such testing racism in their academic life that threatens their mental stability. Though Corliss

desires shooting everybody during the history class, she does not engage in performative acts, but Marie, unburdens her rage by engaging in real protest and confrontations with her authorities.

The female protagonists Marie and Corliss are possessed with positive resilient factors like intelligence, perseverance, self-esteem and an indomitable spirit. In the case of Corliss her social factors of resilience are non-abusive and supportive parents, extended family members and the Native and white teachers support. Marie's environment factors include good and supportive parents and her group of homeless Indians in the streets of Seattle to whom she provides sandwich and is lovingly called "Sandwich lady" (IK 144).

For Native women like Marie and Corliss, apart from the historical trauma background that makes a constant presence in their lives, they are also scapegoats of

Native American female stereotypes. As Native men have been stereotyped by the Euro-American white society, Native women too are equally fixed and framed in stereotypes as sexy Native 'princess Pocahontas', 'squaw' and 'papoose'.

Marie, who is full of fire and potency to self-define her identity, resists to stereotyped identity. Her knowledge, indomitable spirit, clever interrogation she puts her white teachers to embarrassment. Her self-assertiveness commands the white man to acknowledge her identity, "so individualistic. Not tribal at all" (IK 393). Dr. Marther could not imagine a Native woman "so impulsive" and "so emotional" (IK 393). She is a powerful contemporary female warrior, who declares, "I'm not some demure little Indian woman healer talking spider this, spider that, am I? I'm not babbling about the four directions or the two-legged, four-legged and winged. I'm talking like a twentieth century Indian woman. Hell, a twenty-first century Indian, and you can't handle it..." (IK 247).

Corliss all-powerful to establish herself in the white world is also aware of the limitations set to her because of her racial identity. "She knew, she wasn't supposed to be in college and she wasn't supposed to be as smart as she was and she wasn't supposed to read the books she read and she wasn't supposed to say the thing she said. She was too

young and too female and too Indian to be that smart" (Blasphemy402). Corliss, intelligent, smart, self-confident and fully resistive to others' efforts to shape and determine her future can no way relate to the pop culture defined papoose or squaw or princess Pocahontas. She declares "my very existence disproves what my conquerors believe about this world and me" (Blasphemy 402) and asserts "But I exist" (Blasphemy 402).

Marie is full of anger and protest and flares up at white man's lie in any form but Corliss takes advantage of positive ethnic stereotypes and does not feel any "guilt about it" (Blasphemy 369). She is pragmatically judicious, when she feels while Indians can be slaughtered just for the reason of being Indian why can't they enjoy certain privileges for the same damn reason. Highly analytical, she willingly adopts to the romanticized stoic Indian stereotype because she believes that, "[I]n the twenty-first century, any Indian with a decent vocabulary wielded enormous social power" provided that person is stoic who rarely spoke. (Blasphemy 369).

Anger according to Alexie is a prime component for survival and is best possessed by Marie than any of his characters. Anger is also a major symptom of historical trauma which is well adopted by Mari for a more positive action of resistance and to demand and defend the rightful identity of the Natives. Instead of becoming a victim of the unappeasable rage that leads to self-distinction either by addiction to alcohol as in the case of most Spokanes or by suicide John Smith. "Anger in itself can be positive or destructive. That is why you need to use imagination to make it positive" explains Alexie to John and Carl Bellante in an interview (Alexie10).

Resilience theory insists on building a positive self-image in the face of adversity. Marie and Corliss who are considered bright kids from their childhood are expected to play the role of redeemer for their society. They are very determined and positive of their self-image and least bothered of the degrading and derogatory stereotypes of their colonizers. The greatest risk factors they face as Native women is the negative stereotype, apart from racism and other social problems, which they have disproved by their intelligence, education and indomitable spirit. They successfully emerge out as highly potential

individuals by breaking the negative stereotypes with their potential to self-define their individual identity and to create a new history that could be preface for the emerging young Native women.

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