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## Bearable with Humor, Pain in Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems*

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Keywords:	Abstract
<p>- Sherman Alex - the Native American poetry - Black Humor - The Business of Fancy dancing - Stories and Poems</p> <p><b>Article Info</b></p>	<p>For the time being Native Americans still doubt and question their status amid the American nation. The consciousness of being marginal and subjugated appears clearly in their literature. Within the rising voices that echo widely against repression and injustice, they have had their voice, a voice that reflects historical agony, cultural deprivation, and political stings. Moreover, what distinguishes their voices is the amount of mutilation and loss that turns into humor and sarcasm. This voice ceaselessly tries to bring back a fragmented identity from ashes.</p> <p>Sherman Alexie, a poet, novelist, short story writer, filmmaker, essayist, and comedian, is one of the best to adopt the role of fighting for his people to reclaim their status. His people and their dignified and excruciating survival inform much of his multi-genre works and unify his style. Frequently, the black humor technique pops up in his poems</p>

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## تجرع الألم بالفكاهة للشاعر شيرمن الاكسي في البومه قصائد و قصص من عمل الرقص الحالم

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<b>الخلاصة:</b> حتى الوقت الراهن مكانة الهنود الحمر محل شك واستغراب في وسط الامة الامريكية المعاصرة حيث ان شعور التهميش والاختصاص بات واضحا في ادبهم ومع تعالي الأصوات التي تتاهض بصداها القمع والحيث ظهر صوتهم الاجش الذي يعكس برحاء الماضي والحرمان الثقافي واشواك السياسة والمثير للدهشة هو حجم الايذاء والضياع الذي جعل هذا الصوت تهكمي وفكاهي في نفس الوقت كمحاولة تبدو متواصلة لإرجاع فتات هوية تهالكت الى رماد. الشاعر والروائي وكاتب القصة القصيرة ومنتج الأفلام وكاتب المقالات والكوميدي شيرمن الاكسي هو أفضل من تبنى دور المدافع عن اهله لاسترجاع مكانتهم حيث ان البقاء الأليم والجليل لأهله يخبر الكثير من اعماله متعددة الاجناس وأسلوبه الموحد الذي اتقن تقنية الكوميديا السوداء التي بانتت تطفح على قصائده لتبين الألم البليغ تارة وتجرعه تارة أخرى.	<b>الكلمات الدالة:-</b> - شيرمن ألكسي -شعر الأمريكان الأصليين -عمل الرقص الحالم -قصص وقصائد <b>معلومات البحث</b> <b>تاريخ البحث:</b> الاستلام: ٢٠٢٠\٢\٢٥ القبول: ٢٠٢٠\٣\١٦ التوفر على النت
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## **I. The Native American Scene:**

The real circumstances and the historical events, which the Native Americans encountered, have been shockingly horrifying. They were left traumatized by a grand scale of violence, loss of identity, disenfranchised claims, and the enslaved life. They were deprived of any sense of advancement and bitterly experienced an equally awful prospect that nothing would occur. Statistically, they were about 145 million in the west of America and about 80 million in the north of America and Canada, but they were exterminated by the new European settlers in wicked ways; directly by wars and battles and indirectly by mass poisoning and epidemics (Dobyns, 342-43). Their environment got destroyed by the new settlers to support their projects, whether agricultural or industrial. The invaders' greed for fur, wood, and their constant efforts of erecting mills and dams, establishing factories, housing, changed the ecosystem and wasted the value of the virgin nature that worth much for the natives (Cronon, 98). On the religious level, after the devastating wave of extermination, the Indians left vulnerable to Christian missionaries. The task of conversion to Christianity was preceded by civilizing the natives who "should first be civilized, by being brought from their scattered and wild course of life, unto Co-habitation and Government, ... to be trusted with the sacred ordinances of Jesus Christ, in Church-Communion" (Eliot, 45).

## **II. Sherman Alexie**

Alexie was born Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr., on October 7, 1966 in Wellpinit town on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington State. He descends from Coeur d'Alene father, a heavy drinker, who sometimes logged and drove trucks, "I am a Spokane / Coeur d'Alene Indian from Wellpinit, Washington, where I live on the Spokane Indian reservation. Everything I do now, writing and otherwise, has its origin in that"

His mother, Lillian, who was Spokane, sewed and worked odd jobs to keep her family alive. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, accumulation of the cerebrospinal fluid in his brain, that made him have rather an abnormal head the thing that let the children mocked his large head by calling it the "Globe" (Cline, 197). Teased in school, he began educating himself and excelled in high school and enrolled in Gonzaga University. He dropped out and found a job as a busboy. He was threatened with a knife at his twenty first birthday, he got robbed and offended severely. He grew disillusioned developing a drinking habit and developed a keen sense of humor, largely as a solace of social defense. He then decided to join his study, enrolling at Washington State University in Medicine College, but he failed because of the sight of blood and corpses in anatomy class. Coincidentally, an idea triggered to his mind to join a poetry workshop. There he met his muse, Alex Kuo, an American Indian man who encouraged and inspired Alexie to pursue a career in writing and to be acclaimed author with many prolific writings. Shortly after graduating from Washington State University in 1991,

he published *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems* (1992) which got wide response and earned him immediate recognition as a new literary voice (Napierkowski. 234–35.)

Alexie is a poet, novelist, short story writer, filmmaker, essayist, and comedian. He represents the new generation of the Native American writers whose writings set on in 1990s. he is mainly concerned with portraying the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of the lives of the native Americans who live reservations. David L Moore sums up Alexie's major themes saying that Alexie

shares with many American indian writers a central motif reaffirming Native lives and native nationhood ... Alexie invariably circulates the grave themes of ongoing colonial history and its personal effects in indian country. Alexi's five genres- poetry, short fiction, novel, non-fiction, and film – weave through such modern and postmodern questions as psychological and social border crossings; internalized oppression; violence; addiction; the absent father; and racial tension, particularly white guilt. (297)

He credits his difficult childhood with helping him develop his imagination. The major traumatic event is his living in the Native American reservations, which were places replete with ugly poverty and stricken by alcoholism and drug abuse. There His life and his people's life were doubled by lack of education and health care services. Jace Weaver reports that "on some reservations, unemployment runs as high as 85-90 percent. Health statistics chronically rank Natives at or near the bottom. Substance abuse, suicide, crime, and violence are major problems among both urban and reservation populations" (Weaver, 11).

### **III. Dark Humor: Definition and Impact.**

Humor is a basic technique to express unique feelings towards something. It emanates from a real sense of laughter, amusement or pleasure. In the normal use, the term "humor" refers to what is purely comic: it evokes, as it is sometimes said, sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself (Abrams, 331). It is produced in a myriad of modes as comedy, farce, irony, satire etc. The term dark humor is imprecise and elusive. The term was coined in the late 1930 by the French poet and critic Ndre Pertou as (humor noir) which means dark or back humor. (Hedrich, 26). It is a new form of modernist social satire. It is unlike the traditional notion of correction because it apparently "offers none of the optimism of conventional social satire that suggests correction of vice will lead to the reintegration of the individual into society" (Colleta, 2). It presents traumatic scenes and allusions and questions the basic values of humanity in a horrifying but humorous way. It is a grim form of comedy that, according to Virginia Woolf, leaves readers "laughing so hard they feel as grave as corpses" (299). "In Modernist dark humor, social arrangements have become too fractured to offer the necessary conformity from which social generalizations can be extracted, and

Modernist social satires abandon any hope of understanding the world” (Colleta, 6). It is apparently seen that dark humor was highly intensified in the post-modernist period because humorists have gravely been inspired by post atomic and post holocaust repercussions. Alexie deliberately connects humor to trauma and survival when he once said that “the two funniest groups of people I’ve ever been around are Native Americans and Jewish folks” he pointedly adds, “so I guess there’s something inherently funny about genocide”(quoted in Peterson, xvii).

The primary objective of his use of black humor is to criticize "the misguided American imagination and its perspective on Native American culture" (Bloom, 220). The common view of the controlling white Americans is largely shaped by the elements of the Fourth Estate, namely; media, television, films, popular culture. The formation of this unrealistic view is by no means a result of real and constant contact between cultures which will eventually lead to a sense of acceptance, understanding, and peaceful coexistence.

Alexie's comprehensive observation of the ills, defects and problems of the American society and its inadequate view of the Native Americans fosters his use of dark humor as a healing technique. Highlighting this view Ted-Gourneolos states that "because of the inescapable heterogeneity of society in which multiplicity and desire lead to 'the ceaseless conflict of social life' [dark humor] functions as a way to negotiate the dangers and pitfalls of community"(Gourneolos & Greene, 2011:xviii).

The theory upon which Alexie's dark humor depends, among the three main theories of humor: Incongruity, Superiority, and Catharsis, is Catharsis "in which humor comes from momentary eruptions of relief of psychological and/or social tension" (Gourneolos & Greene, 2011:xviii). He uses dark humor as a healing substance by which he alleviates the deep wound of social injustice, discrimination, protracted subjugation, and obliteration of identity that the Native Americans suffered at the hands of the controlling white race. Philip Heldrich goes further to consider Alexie's dark humor as a weapon stating that "[it] becomes a weapon enabling survival [because it] undermines, resists, levels, and liberates"(Heldrich, 32)

#### **IV. *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems (1992)***

*The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems* (1992) was the first work that Sherman Alexie produced. It also reflected the real life and experiences of the author who combine his real impressions towards being an Indian person. Despite the fact that Alex Kue inspired Alexie to enroll in the workshop of poetry, Kuo was the first admirer who finds in the junior author spontaneous humor and an elusive talent that disobeys the mechanics of the workshops and academia: “I wanted books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend” (Cline, 197). Kuo praised and reviewed Alexie’s work in a letter attached to the introduction of *The Business of Fancydancing*, annotating:

Alexie's work has escaped the pervasive influence of writing workshops, academic institutions and their subsidized intellect, and has instead focused on reservation and border realities in his eastern section of Washington state.

Central to this landscape inhabited by family, friends, and a wild coterie of reservation cops, seers, Buffalo Bills, Crazy Horses, and of course, fancydancers, is the absence of self-indulgence. The characters in Alexie's work have actual identities whose faces have shadows that suggest other histories. (Alexie, 1992, IV)

Native American basic theme is survival from the terror of extermination they got at the hand of the colonizers who are now alleging to be the indigenous of the land. The increasingly conditions of lack of education, bad health care services, in addition to suicide, crime, violence, drugs, and alcoholism fueled the anger of the poet. Yet, his anger is reconciled through imagination. The lone hope for the inhabitants on the reservation, Alexie realizes, lies in the power of the imagination. For him, "[i]magination is the only weapon on the reservation." (Otfinoski, 102). Alexie takes the theme further to another dimension; the use of imagination tempered by a sense of humor suggests a ray of hope; a hope for survival. Thus, the major prevailing technique in the poet's writing is dark humor that empowers his people with resistance and resilience to live. Paula Gunn Allen, commenting on the Native American humor, affirms that "humor softens ... anger, celebrates ... survival. Humor is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding, and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction" (Allen, 159). Therefore, his humor gives a chance to his people to recover from anger and transcend their feelings of pain and loss. Alexie comments: "Humor is self-defense on the rez. You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they'll listen or laugh" (quoted in Grassian, 2).

The first crucial theme Alexie provokes amid the Native American communities is hunger. The first prosaic poem of the volume is "Travelling" in which a boy, who is starving in a moving van, asks his father for something to eat or drink:

It was hunger made me move then, not a dream, and I reached down and rummaged through the cooler for something to eat, drink. Two slices of bread, a half-full Pepsi, melting ice. My hand was cold when I touched my father's arm.  
"Hey, Dad, we ain't got any food left."  
"What's in your hand?"  
"Just two slices of bread."  
"Well, you can have a jam sandwich, enit?"

“What’s that?”

“You just take two slices of bread and jam them together.”

Willie laughed loudest and looked back at me.

“You can have a wish sandwich, too,”

(Travelling, 13)

“A wish sandwich” is a mirage of water in the eyes of the thirsty. The title of the poem, “Travelling”, and the van on which the occasion of the poem happens suggests the transitional phase of the Native American people towards fulfilling their dignity and claiming their rights. Furthermore, the poem is the van which may carry their wishes and dreams to the outer world. It is their most effective means to get justice

Humor is, by far, the most fundamental characteristic of Alexie’s work which he used in the opening poem of his first volume. Alexie creates a dialogue pushing the dominant discourse to the verge of humanity to address the very real problems facing the Indians in and off the reservation. Alexie “employs dark humor to navigate the absurdities of cultural inequality, the breakup of community, and a loss of myth and ritual” (Heldrich, 20).

The idea of the van in “Travelling” goes on in the following poem, “Translated from the American,” where a mother with her son and a grandmother both discuss the blue eyes and the future if the son. The grandmother emphasizes the process of assimilation to obliterate the Native American identity:

“He still has blue eyes.” she said. “Only newborns are supposed to have blue eyes.”

She studied my face for a reaction. I felt it darken by halves.

“When are they going to change?” she asked....

“They’re always going to be blue,” I said. “You know that.”

(Translated from the American, 20-21)

Although it is impossible for the blue eyes to turn into another colour, the humorous question, “When are they going to change?”, shocks the mother when she comes to conclude that “Indians are still nomadic, always halfway.” (Translated from the American, 21) and this is still a bitter truth. The van here is symbolizes the ongoing escape of identity of the Native Americans.

The memories of the reservations and the powerlessness status-quo of the Indians undermine their fragile existence. Families, tribes and Indian communities are sieged and cut out of the world. The witty way Alexie uses proves the amount of the weakness that can well be realized from “Travelling”, through the dialogue between the father and his friend about the father's son:

I was awake, listening to the sleeping sounds of the other Skins, to my father talking to his assistant coach, Willie Boyd, both trying to stay awake, afraid of the dark.

“Willie, I’m getting too damned old for this.”

“We’d win more games if we could hit our free throws, enit?”

“Yeah, maybe. I guess we need to find a couple more players. Arnold gets tired, you know?”

“Shit, he’s young. When I was his age I was the toughest goddamned Indian on the reservation, don’t you know?”

“No way, I lived next door to you. Shit, you weren’t even the toughest Indian on the block, enit?”

And they laughed.

(Travelling, 13)

Even though Alexie confesses that Native Americans are an endangered race, he still retains a certain humorous spirit, because as he himself sees that “humor can survive even death” (Moore, 300). In “Love Hard,” Alexie sees that Indians scarcely could live and survive the agonies of colonization through the old stories. The title is ironic. Instead of expecting a romantic love story, the reader is shocked with the amount of suffering the Indian underwent:

“Your father always knew how to love hard,”  
you tell me, crawling over broken glass, surviving  
house fires and car wrecks, gathering ash  
for your garden, Hookum, and for the old stories

where the Indian never loses.

(Love Hard, 31)

Humorously, it is not a love to crawl over broken glass or to be burnt inside your house; it is the instinct to survive and to live on the edge of life: “I’ll find the hard edges of the earth /where I was raised, dust /thin and unforgiving, time and God and beer/ following us in rows.” (Love Hard, 31).

Poverty and alcoholism are recurrent images that pervade the life on the reservation and pervade *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems*. In “Futures,” commenting on a sentence by Lucille Clifton saying “*oh children think about the good time*” (Futures, 35), Alexie comes after to details the “good times” he and his peers have lived on the reservation:

We lived in the HUD house



for fifty bucks a month.  
Those were the good times.

ANNIE GREEN SPRINGS WINE  
was a dollar a bottle.  
My uncles always came over  
to eat stew and fry bread  
to get drunk in the sweatlodge  
to spit and piss in the fire. (Futures, 35)

Alexie manipulates dark humor as “an effective strategy to point out historical and present conditions of inequality created by white hegemony and convey conflicts generated by assimilation” (Heldrich, 25). Another image of poverty and alcoholism appears in “War All the Time” where the poet uses implicit criticism for the sacrifices that were wasted because of the injustice the Native Americans got from the American government.

Crazy Horse comes back from Vietnam  
straight into the Breakaway Bar,  
sits down at the same table  
he was sitting at two years earlier  
when he received his draft notice.

Crazy Horse asks the Bartender for a beer  
free, because he’s some color of hero  
although he doesn’t know if it’s red or white  
because there are no mirrors in the bush,  
only eyes tracing paths through the air,

eyes tearing into the chest, searching  
for the heart. Crazy Horse sells his medals  
when he goes broke, buys a dozen beers  
and drinks them all, ... (War All the Time, 65)

The poet seems to justify alcoholism to forget despair and to survive. Such tragicomic laughter and sarcastic humor exposes the false ideologies of the dominant culture and probes the amount of pain and loss amid often-bewildering and absurd conditions.

when the Bartender asks him why  
he’s giving up everything he earned,  
Crazy Horse tells him you can’t stop a man  
from trying to survive, no matter where he is.

(War All the Time, 65)

To sum up, through a general survey of the Native American literature, the theme of survival is deep-rooted in many works written by Native American writers. The invaders came saturated by cruel enmity which aims at exterminating and annihilating of everything native: identity, language, religious rituals, culture, ceremonies. Their wicked goal was the selfish ownership of land that ought to be achieved at any cost. Though the Indians resisted with everything they had, namely, primitive means, they were severely defeated. The defeat was genocidal. Provoked by latent impact of genocide in their mind, the American Indian people are awakened by their consciousness to survive and revive their extinct nation. Activating their responsibility for their people, the Native American writers and poets focused on the theme of survival widely.

After five centuries of colonization and oppression, Sherman Alexie delineates clear images by poetizing the American Indian struggle. He presents live images of his people in his time and the anguished circumstances they undergo. He zooms in the life of reservations afflicted by extreme poverty, high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse. Such life is accompanied by lack of education and bad health services, alongside the increase of suicide, crime, and violence. The effects of these conditions led to a long-term anger (Moore, 297). In his vision to unveil the sufferings of his people, Alexie is ahead among other Native American poets for using humor heavily and effectively in his poetry especially his *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems*. His anger colored by a sense of humor, particularly dark humor to survive when he once said “in hunger, in anger, in laughter, ... we all want to survive” (Alexie, 1993: 198).

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