

“Red Rage” in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a brief analysis of Sherman Alexie’s novel *Indian Killer* (1996). This work is unique in the way it reflects Native Americans. They are not portrayed as merely the victims of horrific crimes that remain unanswered. On the contrary, the decades of hardships that Indians suffered have resulted in a “red rage” – a bloodthirsty response by Native Americans to racism, violence and oppression. To highlight Alexie’s *Indian Killer* as a groundbreaking piece of literary work, this article also presents a brief history of Native American literature.

KEYWORDS

Native American literature, Native Americans, red rage, racism, violence, assimilation, *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie, identity

Native American Literature¹

According to Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, the incorporation of Indian literature into the American literary canon may be rather problematic, as it questions the boundaries of what has been and is regarded literature.²

Indian tribes were not thought to have literature of any kind for a long period of time, since the expression “literature” meant the culture of the written word. For this reason, to speak about orally transmitted Native literature was logically understood as a contradiction in itself because it was not written. For the first European settlers, orally transmitted Indian stories seemed to remind them of a wild animal language. At that time the Indian was seen as a child of nature in contrast to the European colonizer, who was considered a child of culture.³

Similarly, Bradbury and Ruland maintain that Indians represented wild savages to the Puritans. As the land was guaranteed exclusively to Christians, the indigenous tribes were seen as inadaptable evil spirits and ghosts who needed to be eradicated. Along with the European presumption of the inappropriacy of Indian literature, this is another argument why until recently Indians have been excluded from literature and society and have never enriched the culture the way that of African-Americans did.⁴

As Paulette F. Molin, however, explains, Indian literature experienced a Renaissance movement in the 1960s, when Native Americans asserted their rights and were “able to speak for themselves.”⁵ This era is famous for N. Scott Momaday, who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. This work stimulated interest in Native American literature. Vine Deloria, Jr., another renowned Indian literary Renaissance writer, published *Custer Died for Your Sins* the same year. Both works helped

1 In this article the different terms “Native American,” “Indian” and “Native” will be used interchangeably. This is done in part in order to accurately cite the sources used in this work.

2 Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *Od Puritanismu k Postmodernismu* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1997), 42.

3 Šárka Bubíková, *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v Literatuře* (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2007), 74–75.

4 Ruland, Bradbury, *Od Puritanismu k Postmodernismu*, 42.

5 Paulette Molin, *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 28.

Indian literature penetrate public consciousness, since at the time they were published in the late 1960s the general reading public was not as yet widely familiar with such works.⁶

Other Native American authors who greatly contributed to the Renaissance period are Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Gerald Vizenor and Louise Erdrich, all of whose works continue to be published since the second half of the 20th century. These Renaissance writers paved the way for contemporary authors such as Sherman Alexie, Susan Power, Leanne Howe and David Treuer. Native American literature is now thriving, as many more new voices have emerged from divergent tribes and different parts of the U.S. continent, such as Taiaiake Alfred, Delphine Red Shirt and Richard Van Camp.⁷

Alan R. Velie, the author of *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History* (1994), says that the increase of interest in American Indian literature has triggered a huge wave of criticism which has reviewed American Indian work from the white academic point of view. More recently however, applying white American standards to Indian literature has come to be seen as inappropriate, as the cultures differ in lifestyle and perception of literature.⁸

Similarly, Molin defends Native work when she points out that “tribal literatures are the most American of American literatures.”⁹ She claims that due to the oral transmission of literature pieces, current tribal literature is full of wisdom and in no way shallow or stereotypical. Velie also supports this point of view, maintaining that many modern Native American writers are most promising in artistic creativity in part due to their biracial identity.¹⁰ Specialist in the history of Native American literature Joshua David Bellin also advocates the appreciation of Native American literature. He states that Natives should no longer be seen the way they had been in the past – as demons – but rather as writers whose talents were not recognized and who deserve admiration for the way they have contributed to literature of the continent. Bellin admits that critics, if they do not overlook Indian literature completely, often consider it as a separate genre without realizing how genuinely American it is.¹¹

Similarly, Arnold Krupat, one of the most renowned critics working in the field today, in his study *Red Matters* (2002) admits that although Native American literature has been recently subjected to both negative and positive criticism, the literature itself has been widely neglected by the general public. Krupat asserts that the mass media is responsible for the general disinterest in Native Americans, who as a result are excluded from certain political and social spheres of life in the U.S. He notes that one reason media frequently ignore Native Americans is their supposed lack of interest in popular culture, particularly in politics, which is a common focus in the media. Furthermore, a lack of Native Americans among university students and professors may be the reason this ethnic minority is overlooked in academia. Krupat claims, however, that attention devoted to Native American cultural studies and literature is increasing. He expects this neglected field to soon be flourishing.¹²

6 Molin, *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature*, 28.

7 Molin, *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature*, 28.

8 Alan R. Velie, *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, 2.

9 Molin, *American Indian Themes in Young Adult Literature*, 28.

10 Velie, *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, 12–13.

11 Joshua David Bellin, *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature*, 1–2.

12 Arnold Krupat, Preface to *Red Matters* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

Sherman Alexie and *Indian Killer*

Indian Killer was published in 1996 as a response to critics and audiences regarding the author's previous work as gloomy, although Alexie himself considers his preceding novels and poem collections humorous and to feature happy endings.¹³ To some scholars the book was shocking. To them the novel represented "a departure from the humorous and compassionate attitude" from previous Alexie's works.¹⁴

With reference to John Hewitt, a writer and the founder of the Writer's Resource Center, one of the numerous ways the novel is so dark is the fact that the characters hardly ever manifest a sign of civility. There are numerous examples of confrontation, arguments and "angry rhetoric."¹⁵ In one interview Alexie justifies his motives for writing the controversial novel: "Critics and audience kept talking about *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Reservation Blues* as if they were dark, depressing, Kafka-ish (sic), cockroach-nightmare-crawling-across-the-floor kind of books."¹⁶ To come up with a truly depressing novel, Alexie wrote *Indian Killer*. The novel is classified as "murder mystery," however the author himself says that at the very beginning he intended to write about "Lost Birds" – Indian children adopted by white families who later faced psychological complications such as dysfunctional behavior, problems with alcohol and drugs and an abnormally high suicide rate.¹⁷

Alexie shows his ability to play with language with the title of the book *Indian Killer*, which has two literal meanings. Alexie calls the title of the novel a palindrome, since it can read in two ways "Indian who is a Killer" or "Killer of Indians" – the killer being of Indian ancestry or the killer murdering Indians. As Alexie himself explains, the book is about both tendencies – Indians killing whites and about whites killing Indians.¹⁸

The story is about John Smith, an Indian who is adopted by wealthy white parents Daniel and Olivia Smith, who are unable to have their own children. The story takes place in Seattle in the 1960s, a decade which was notorious for numerous cases of the adoption of Indian children without the consent of the birth family. Despite the couple's intention to provide John with a loving environment, they fail to recognize John's real needs. Regrettably, their "well-intentioned ignorance and obliviousness" result in John's despair and feelings of alienation from society.¹⁹ He suffers from psychological trauma and later develops patterns of dysfunctional behavior. The protagonist develops a sense of intense hatred towards the white race and although the identity of murderer is never revealed in the story, the reader can sense that John is the merciless killer of white men.

Alexie remarks on how he created the characters to relieve his own feeling of trauma, as he believes writing is similar to therapy. In his view, there is no act of redemption for John Smith; the characters suffer pain by design.²⁰ Alexie justifies the portrayal of

13 Thompson Highway, "Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie," 1996. < <http://www.lang.osaka-u.ac.jp/~krkvl/salexie.html>>

14 Giorgio Mariani, "Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*." *Fiar, Forum of the Journal of the International Association of Inter-American Studies* 4.2 (2001): 1.

15 John Hewitt, "An Analysis of *Indian Killer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Daisy Miller*." 30 December 2004. <http://www.poewar.com/dialog-as-a-tool-for-communication-and-division/>

16 Highway, "Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie."

17 Highway, "Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie."

18 Highway, "Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie."

19 Daniel Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 106.

20 Ase Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," *Melus* (Winter 2005): 68–69, 149–169.

violence in Native American work as a logical consequence of hundreds of years of oppression, colonization and murder. In Alexie's own words, Native American literature is about "humiliation and shame."²¹

Generally in Alexie's work the characters suffer from "collective trauma"²² or "blood memory,"²³ as Alexie himself explains. Suffering is an integral part of "Indianness."²⁴ Alexie compares the diaspora of Indian tribes to the diaspora of Jews. The only difference is that Jews have been victimized for a much longer period of time. As Alexie claims, it is fairly impossible to measure the proportion of "Indianness" in an individual. The only indicator of "Indianness," he suggests, may be the indicator of pain, as he sees Indian identity and pain closely intertwined.²⁵

Ultimately, John Smith does not find any redemption for his sins and commits suicide at the end of the novel. Even though the main protagonist is "mentally unstable,"²⁶ Alexie does not guide the reader as to whether John's dysfunctional behavior stems from his Indian genes or whether the problem is "socially based."²⁷ Alexie skillfully incorporates continual doubt into the story, so that Smith cannot be condemned for the crimes that have been committed. Despite the cold-blooded acts, it may be difficult for the reader to find definite motive for these acts.

Alexie chose the setting for the novel intentionally – he has lived in Seattle for many years, therefore he has a deep knowledge of the city and its local environment. In the novel Alexie "implicates the city of Seattle for its lack of diversity and lack of equal opportunity for minorities."²⁸ In fact, he criticizes the city for being "ethnically segregated,"²⁹ for the minorities commonly reside in one part of the city and the white population in the other.

Alienation between different minority groups constitutes another of the main concerns in the novel. For example, John Smith realizes the common ground between African Americans and himself, but it is a huge challenge for him merely to have an ordinary conversation with two African Americans in Seattle's *Best Donuts*. The racial tensions in the city of Seattle become even more undisguised when the local media start to label the murderer the "Indian Killer." This allegation triggers an enormous wave of racism, mainly from the white population, who start to attack random Indians. For instance, Aaron Rogers, one of the white male characters, leads brutal attacks against defenseless, often homeless Indians as revenge for his white brother David, who was supposedly killed by Indians. Surprisingly, at the end of the novel, Sherman reveals that David was not killed by Smith.³⁰

Indians are not portrayed as being outraged as dutiful citizens in the novel, but rather as an extremist and blood-thirsty minority who consistently support the "Indian Killer" in his crimes. Moreover, the local Indians are convinced that the murderer is the

21 Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 25.

22 Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 32.

23 Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 33.

24 Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 26.

25 Nygren, "A World of Story-Smoke," 33.

26 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 108.

27 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 108.

28 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

29 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

30 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

contemporary reincarnation of their national hero and admire him.³¹ Throughout the novel, Alexie widely criticizes the police department of Seattle for racism and discrimination aimed at urban Indian minority. For example, the murder of an Indian is described by a police officer as a “low priority:”

“Oh, shit, of course I remember you. The rookie. Lost your breakfast.” Wilson blushed. “Shit, that case is low priority, rook. One dead Indian don’t add up to much. Some other Indian guy killed her, you know. Happens all the time. Those people are like that. You ask me, it’s PEST CONTROL.”³²

Alexie’s *Indian Killer* is not a book easily read. The novel is filled with uncomfortable tensions and negative emotions. Throughout the novel, John Smith’s story reminds the reader about the numerous mistakes that were made between European white colonizers and Indians in the past. The main hero is a complicated character that can be viewed from two possible contradictory angles – on the one hand, he is an individual to be pitied. On the other, he is a destructive element to be feared. Amber Scott points out that anyone, regardless of race and social background, could become involved in the same kind of “unforgivable horrors.”³³

The hero is torn between two entirely different worlds. As a consequence, he is often immersed in his own thoughts and fails to distinguish between reality and his brutal fantasies. At the end of the novel, the “Indian Killer” does not murder the white man Wilson, but instead takes his own life. But before he jumps from the roof of a building, he merely cuts Wilson in the face. Smith believes that the mark on Wilson’s cheek will “forever mark him as a symbol of white theft and perversion of Native culture.”³⁴ Smith carries out his last violent act on himself:

John dropped the knife, turned away from Wilson, quickly walked to the edge of the building, and looked down at the streets far below. He was not afraid of falling. John stepped off the last skyscraper in Seattle. John fell.³⁵

Red Rage

Due to the outright violent content, *Indian Killer* is a milestone in Native American work to date. In fact, it is the first Native American work which depicts the topic of “red rage” so explicitly. Jon Reyhner describes “red rage” as “the result of impact of generations of trauma, violence and oppression” which colonialism caused to Indian tribes.³⁶ In contemporary American society, some Indian students and their families have purposefully refused to adjust. This attitude can induce “oppositional identities.”³⁷ Alarming, many Native Indian students even denigrate education, including literacy. Historically speaking, abnormal behavior is not unusual for ostracized cultures. For instance, the abuse of illegal

31 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 120.

32 Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 160.

33 Scott, “Indian Killer taps into battle for identity that still rages,” *Austin American Statesman* (1996).

34 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 124.

35 Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 411–412.

36 Jon Reyhner, “Creating Sacred Places for Children.” <<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/AIE/IETplaces.htm>>

37 Reyhner, “Creating Sacred Places for Children.”

substances such as alcohol and drugs has been one of the major problems of Indian society. Often, an abhorrence arises towards other Indians who have become successful and manage to flee the destitute stereotype.³⁸ As Alexie himself admits:

All those qualities about me that made me an ugly duckling on the reservation – ambitious, competitive and individualistic – these are not necessarily good things to be when you're part of a tribe. I've always loved books. I've always loved reading. I planned on becoming a doctor, a pediatrician.³⁹

Krupat notes that other Native American writers like Mommaday in *House Made of Dawn* "dramatize a number of important issues," but these works do not "overtly represent Indian rage" as such.⁴⁰ Similarly, in Silko's *Ceremony*, the abrupt need for rage must be suppressed by the main hero. On the whole, the works by Mommaday, Silko, Vizenor and Deloria, Jr. do not show any aggression in response to the way Indians are treated.⁴¹

Alexie, however, puts the theme of "red rage" in the center of the story. According to him, revenge is justifiable and inevitable for Native Americans. Throughout the novel, vengeance is necessary and cannot be suppressed under any circumstances.⁴² Krupat criticizes *Indian Killer* for this very reason. He states that the novel depicts the idea that "anger, rage and a desire for murderous revenge must be expressed, not repressed or channeled into other possible action," which he finds highly disturbing.⁴³ Krupat compares *Indian Killer* to Alexie's previous work *Reservation Blues*. He claims that whereas the topic of "ethnic hybridity"⁴⁴ is approached as beneficial in *Reservation Blues*, in *Indian Killer* it represents the source of destruction and violence. Similar to other scholars, Daniel Grassian finds *Indian Killer* a significant departure from Alexie's previous novels and poetry collections and in fact all Native American work written to date.⁴⁵

In an interview conducted by Joelle Fraser, Alexie explained his initial stimulus for the novel: "I was sitting at Washington State with frat guys in the back row who I wanted to kill. And I would fantasize about murder."⁴⁶

With this mask, with this mystery, the killer can dance forever. The killer plans on dancing forever. The killer never falls. The moon never falls. The tree grows heavy with owls.⁴⁷

At the end of the novel, the presumed murderer performs a Ghost Dance. This ceremony is more than five hundred years old and was conducted to drive the invading colonizers out and resurrect dead Indians. Used mainly at the end of the novel, the Ghost Dance symbolizes arousal against white oppression. Throughout the novel, Alexie's Indian

38 Reyhner, "Creating Sacred Places for Children."

39 Highway, "Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie."

40 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 108.

41 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 108.

42 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 108.

43 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 103.

44 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 103.

45 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 104.

46 Joelle Fraser, "Sherman Alexie's Iowa Review Interview," *Modern American Poetry*, 2001, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/alexie/fraser.htm.

47 Alexie, *Indian Killer*, 420.

characters desire to “banish [the whites] from the continent.”⁴⁸ Similarly, in Krupat’s view, the perpetrator does not aim to end the war between the whites and Indians. What he/she desires is revenge and death of all inhabitants of European origin.⁴⁹

Amber Scott also admits that she feels uncomfortable reading a contemporary novel which depicts so much hatred against the white world. Scott, however, believes it is equally disturbing to read about whites beating defenseless Indians.⁵⁰ Lydia Cooper also finds the novel *Indian Killer* “highly troublesome.” She explains that the novel contains explicit examples of “suffering that are manifestations of the symbolism and rhetoric of religious violence.”⁵¹

Giorgio Mariani seems to be more conflicted in his view of *Indian Killer*. On one hand, he finds the novel filled with “red terrorism fueled by an anti-racist racism analogues.”⁵² On the other hand, he asserts that the novel is conflicting in its message: it both “justifies” and “repudiates violence as a creative force.”⁵³ As Mariani says, Alexie’s principal goal is to depict the “perverse and mutually destructive nature”⁵⁴ of the confrontation between whites and Indians. For him, then, *Indian Killer* illustrates a deterrent example of violence breeding only violence, no matter on what grounds the actual roots of such aggression.⁵⁵

From the very beginning of the novel, a reader may think that John Smith is the Indian Killer, due to his peculiar behavior and inner driving force. However, the real murderer is not explicitly revealed in any part of the novel. In fact, there are other characters that detest whites and therefore could be the murderer. As Grassian says, “Alexie’s intention is to show how Indians commonly experience violent rage and anger due to marginalization, discrimination, and unequal power struggles.”⁵⁶

Formal Literary Devices

The novel *Indian Killer* features an omniscient narrator and has been characterized as a “murder mystery.”⁵⁷ This third-person narrative is not regarded as an easily readable book because of the shift between different characters’ perspectives. Generally, the book is rich in symbols and metaphors which largely stem from Indian mythology.⁵⁸

Throughout the story it is difficult to find concrete answers. Instead, the book is filled with the divisions within society and with arguments which follow each other at a swift pace. Generally, the sentences are very short and dynamic. The dialogue is fast and filled with angry words. There seems to be no room for lengthy explanations of

48 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 125.

49 Krupat, *Red Matters*, 102.

50 Amber Scott, “Indian Killer taps into battle for identity that still rages,” *Austin American Statesman*, 1996.

51 Lydia Cooper, “The Critique of Violent Atonement in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and David Treuter’s *The Hiawatha*,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (Winter 2010): 32–57, 1–2.

52 Mariani, “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*.”

53 Mariani, “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*.”

54 Mariani, “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*.”

55 Mariani, “Negotiating Violence and Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*.”

56 Grassian, *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, 117.

57 Highway, “Spokane Words: An interview with Sherman Alexie” [online] 1996, terminate section.

58 Hewitt, “An Analysis of *Indian Killer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Daisy Miller*,” 30 December 2004.

opinions. These literary techniques further the theme of *Indian Killer*, as they suggest an extremely fragile relationship and cultural conflict between the white and Indian community.⁵⁹

Generally, Native American literature portrays the daily hardship in the lives of Indians. Many Natives write about traditions and their lifestyle. Others write about the loss of Indian identity or the struggle with the fundamental dilemma of whether to stay on the reservation or seek a better future elsewhere. In *Indian Killer* Sherman Alexie uses some of these typical themes, but his work is profoundly different from other Native American writers to date because he refuses to treat Indians as mere victims. Instead, his novel is filled with "red rage," racism and violence. Alexie's Indians refuse to be the targets of oppression and seek revenge. Alexie portrays the fragile relationship between Natives and whites, then shows the senseless hatred that arises when a relationship is so damaged. His message becomes one not just for whites or Indians, but for all of us.

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59 Hewitt, "An Analysis of *Indian Killer*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Daisy Miller*."

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