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Sherman Alexie's Environmental Racism in *The Summer of Black Widows*

Abstract

Relationship with the environment is rooted in the epistemology of a community. The white worldview favors hierarchy of the 'chain of being'. Environment being at the lowest rung deserves only one response from mankind: subjugation and destruction which entail white dominance for ecocide of the Native American environment. Alexie's incorporation of Nature is not an escapist stance; it comes from the understanding that no venture into future is possible without understanding the past. The Native American epistemology is land based in which geography, events, myth and history cohere with mutually supporting brotherhood of humans and non-humans. Alexie is an environmental racist who believes that the Euroamericans are responsible for the breach of the Native American ecological balance. Dislocations of the Natives and the destruction of their environment meant the annihilation of their civilization. Alexie's poetry imaginatively recovers the Native American relationship with the environment destroyed by Euro-American colonization.

Key Words:

Native American Literature, Euroamerican Literature, Anthropomorphism, Speciesism, Nature, Horizontal and Vertical Relationship with Nature, Sherman Alexie

Introduction

Euro-American discourses since contact have been representing Native American relationship between humans and non-humans from their white capitalistic colonial perspective that legitimizes the white domination of the Red Indian peoples and their environment through the 'Rights of Conquest' as theorized by Locke:

that any 'Christian' (European) happening upon "wasteland" – most particularly land that was vacant or virtually vacant of human inhabitants – not only a "natural right," but indeed an obligation to put such land to "productive use." Having assumed thus performed "God's will" by "cultivating" and thereby "conquering" the former wilderness," its discoverer can be said to "own" it. (Jaimes, 1992, p. 28)

Juridical discourse concretized the abstract philosophical rationale for subjugation by legalizing Manifest Destiny and expansionism. The claim is that United States has inherent right over Indians lands and resources because it is "moral and legal basis for American territorial existence" (Jaimes, 1992, p. 28). Euroamerican worldview is well expressed in Emerson's view of cosmic ecology which places man at the centre of the universe with only God above. Nature at the lowest stratum of hierarchy in Emerson's world view (Carey 1988) rationalizes its (mis)use and exploitation.

The natural consequence of the Euroamerican epistemology was ecocide (ecology + genocide) resulting in the imbalance of Native American conception of culture in which human beings live in harmony and coordination with the Nature. Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*, despite his heroism, is damned at the end suggesting that nature, though beautiful, remains alien. Melville contradicts Emerson's optimism that man can dominate Nature. *Moby Dick*, the gigantic white whale, is indecipherable the force that pervades the novel implying that man cannot read "truth"

in Nature, though it is possible in Emerson. The implication is that whether Nature is graspable as in Emerson or elusive as in Melville, harmony is missing. The Euro-American version of Nature conceives only the relationship of competition for a man. At the most, this relationship can reach the mirror-approach as in Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" (1893): White immigrants

[I]n moving to the wild unsettled lands of the frontier, shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their *primitive racial energies*, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with vigor, and independence, and creativity that was the source of American democracy and national character. (p. 76, emphasis added)

Onwards from Descartes, Euro-American institutions have imposed and promoted official landscape through the education system that promotes separation of the local and the universal. It teaches to serve the universal at the cost of the local. It teaches the scholars Euro-American conception of time and place that supposedly transcends the local and immediate issues and makes them

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indifferent to their relationship with their families, cultures and indigenous environment and landscape. For example, the University of Arizona's campus stands on the land close to the Santa Cruz River. The Tohono O'odham used to cultivate gardens in its floodplain. Later, Mexican Americans grew their crops along its banks in the cottonwoods sheltering against the searing sun. Now, these traditional ways and resources have been replaced with interstate freeway and Tucson Convention Centre. The Tucson city extracts so huge quantity of water for its University malls, swimming pools and golf courses that its water level has dramatically dropped. Brinckerhoff rightly defines the official landscape as an extraction-oriented landscape imposed by private, international and government organizations on indigenous geographies with total disregard for indigenous cultures, environments and peoples (Adamson, 2001, p. 90). The White fiction recording of this destruction of the environment is just pleasurable adventurous reading for the white audience. The Dime Novel or Western Dime, for instance, is a genre that flourished from the 1860s to the 1900s. Daryl Jones in *The Dime Novel Western* (1978) observes that it was meant to provide White American middle-class escape from urban monotony through plots of adventure of a few settlers in a lone cabin in expansive deserts, or amongst snow-covered mountains and occasionally near a river near the frontier, a dangerous place because of wilderness, cattle roundups and Indian raids. These pleasure and adventure stories of the white hunters are for Native Americans the stories of the disaster of their ecological balance and the basic source of life.

Contrarily, the spirit of Native American culture is *hozoq*, a Navajo word which can be translated into English as 'harmony' (Gill, 1999). Windigo in traditional Chippeva tales is "a giant skeleton of ice that represents the fear of winter starvation and cannibalism" (Adamson, p. 104). It is believed that when a dangerous spirit possesses the souls of the people, they "go windigo" and "become greedy, gluttonous, and have an insatiable desire for human flesh" (p. 104). Hallowell explains that 'windigo' refers to any kind of excessiveness. Hoarding, any manifestation of avarice, even excessive fasting for spiritual knowledge is discountenanced (1958, pp. 172-173). These are contradictory positions that inform the conflict of the two cultures.

Native American cosmology is featured by an unalienable relationship between tribe and community. Euroamerican individualism is incompatible with the Native view of life: "The very idea of individual self-representation is fundamentally at odds with many Native American world-views" argues Paula Gunn Allen (1986, p. 55). Alexie's first-person voice, for instance, is beyond Descartes' subjectivity that perceives man and the world as opposite entities (Ashcroft, et al, 2007, p. 202). Rolling Thunder, (Boyd, 1974) a medicine man, even advises not to "trust the water that flows down the white man" (1974). For him, there is nothing unwanted in the world and no weeds; they are "helpers" for him. Mad Bear also believes in cosmic harmony and mourns how it has been destroyed insensitively: "... the white folks mess up everything. Cuttin' down trees. Never talkin' to the trees. White folks, they have never been taught about that. No natural manners. Killing the little four-legged peoples" (Boyd, 1974, p. 148).

Ella Deloria's *Waterlily* (1998) fictionally demonstrates the communal nature of Native American interconnectivity. The narrator observes at the beginning of the novel: "Almost from the beginning [of life], everyone could declare, 'I am not afraid; I have relatives'" (Deloria 20). *Waterlily*, the protagonist, "has found an 'and' to replace the 'either/or' of Euro-American conventions of identity: for her characters, continuity and change, historical and contemporary influences, individuality and interrelationship are of equal importance," observes Shelley Reid about her view of life and its significance in the modern America (Reid 18). For Joy Harjo, in the Native American sensibility "[a]ll persons have still their own identity, but not separate from everything else" (Harjo 92). She "speak(s) of a world in which nature and culture, event and place are not separate" (Adamson, p. 122). Simon Ortiz defines place as the "spiritual source [of] who you are in terms of your identity" (p. 120). Alexie too is very clear on the tribal roots of literature: "I'm not going to speak for everybody," he clarifies. "I'm one individual heavily influenced by my tribe. And good art doesn't come out of assimilation – it comes out of tribalism" (Berglund 241). Nostalgia, opines Berglund, is significant in his poetic process. It does not mean unrealistic indifference to contemporary American reality. Alexie is an interview with Thiel, observes: "In my dictionary, Indian and nostalgic are synonymous. As colonized people, I think we are always looking to the past for some real and imaginary sense of purity and authenticity" (p. 243). The purpose of this stance is to retrieve the Native American cosmic human-non-human mutuality imaginatively and to expose the colonial inhuman annihilation of the fauna and flora and harmony of the continent.

Literature Review

America as a New World conceptually implies Euro-American bias; it was not new for 54 million Indians already living there for 28000 years. The term New World refers to a new settlement for the whites, says O'Gorman: "The concept of a 'new world' ... refers to an entity that is new only in so far as it is capable of transforming itself into a replica of the 'old' world" (quoted in Handley, 2007, p. 19) which was already civilized and advanced, enlightened and knowledgeable. This region needed transformation by the forces which had matured the old one suggested Buffon and De Pauw who even claimed that this region suffered a deluge like Noah's flood which led to "universal organic degeneration" (Canizares-Esguerra, 2001, p. 47). The purposive implication of this anachronism was to deny the New World its place in the history and 'rationalize' colonial violence on its people and lands. White colonialism erased its history to write the story of Adamic innocence on its Edenic virginity (Handley, 2007, p. 21).

Pratt (Mills, 2003, p. 72) observes that even scientific formation of information is not objective: even botanical classification of the flora of a region erases the local classification and its possible focus on the ritualistic and medicinal purpose of plants. Dunlap observes that the westernized naming of the New World's indigenous unknown fauna and flora alienated the Native Americans' 'folk biology' from their tribalistic cultures (pp. 23-24). The conquest of Latin America and the development of mono-crop agriculture brought about the "largest environmental transformation of Latin America since the conquest" (McCook, 2002, p. 5). The rhetoric of discovery "rationalize[d] nature" and "maximize[d] yields" (pp. 25, 12). Alexie's poetry mourns these losses in resistant imaginative expression, reconstructs the Native cultural purity and relates it with the modern American White-washed epistemology.

P. Jane Hafen mourns the racist attitude of Americans to the Indians. She says that they, the parents, told her sons Indian stories to give them a sense of who they are and where they come from, but as mixed-bloods

they suffer indignities resulting from the ignorance and prejudices of others. ... my second son – who does not "look Indian" – once wore his bead choker to school, where his high school English teacher ridiculed him for "playing Indian Joe." At college, my elder son – who does look Indian – has suffered violent and personal racist attacks. (Berglund, 2010, p. 71)

Nancy J. Peterson observes that Alexie's tribalist approach "is an act of resistance to the racism and violence of white America" (Berglund, p.153) which demonstrated itself in multiple ways. The smallpox blankets, "more Christianity, more English, more private ownership, real houses, real marriages, real names" to make the "the Great body of Indians ... become merged in the indistinguishable mass of our population" (Iverson, 1998, pp. 16-17). Iverson notes Rather Thomas Jefferson Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, predicted that most of the Indian tribes would perish except the Pueblo, the Navajos, and the Sioux (pp. 16-17) and the census of 1900 evidenced this forecast.

Theoretical Framework

Deane Curtin, the American environmental thinker, defines Environmental Racism as "the connection in theory and practice, of race and environment so that the oppression of the one is connected to and supported by the oppression of the other" (2005, p. 145). A positive component of this approach is that there are those whose harmony with Nature is romanticized: the familiar construction of 'ecological Indian', for instance, as Krech suggests (1999). Even this positive component has two shades: for Euroamericans this relationship between the Native Americans and Nature is destructive for the Natives: it equates them with Nature implying practically that they [the Whites] can dispense with them [the Natives]. And the negative component of this approach is that there are those who are accused because of their racial identity of destroying the environment. But historically it was white colonization of the Americas that destroyed the environment. In the roots of this destruction lies hegemonic anthropocentrism that minimizes environmental and animal actors' non-human rights of the shared earth. The plight of non-humans has continued to worsen because we could not situate humans ecologically and non-humans ethically. The solution to this crisis lies in the interrogation of the construction of the category of the human against nature. Native Americans do not construct humans against Nature; for them, the Great Spirit, animals, plants, and human beings all exist in a horizontal simultaneity in which no one can dominate the others – animals, plants, and earth. There are, for them, no others actually.

Australian Ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2001) observes that dualistic human thinking categorizes ontology in such a way that human always lies at the right side of the binary. It continues to structure reason centered culture and the masculinist attitude to an environment that secured European dominance but is now fatal to the "biophysical limits of the planet" (p. 5). Ecological imperialist othering of nature and animals effectively renders them external to human needs as if they were an inexhaustible resource and service to mankind (pp. 4-5).

Alfred Crosby in his *The Columbian Exchange* (1973) and *Ecological Imperialism* (1986) evaluates how both materials and approaches, specimens of humans, animals, and plants, were exchanged between Old World and New World. The consequence of the white-washing of America is that

... when migration takes place, those creatures who have been longest in isolation suffer most, for their genetic material has been least tempered by the variety of world diseases... A few of the first rank killers among the diseases are native to the Americas (Crosby 1973).

As 90% of the Native Americans were genetical of blood type O, observes Crosby (1973), the imported (Eurasian and African) diseases proved massively devastating. Euroamericans and Native Americans exercise different conceptions of being-in-the-world: western conception essentially lies in the centrality of the individual. In colonized regions, true respect for indigeneity was absent; even apparently divinely intentioned missionaries, administrators and settlers conceived of themselves as bestowing (but actually imposing) the blessings of 'civilization' upon the 'brutes' and heathens. Clearing of land for White American progress exterminated indigenous ecosystems while Indian people plants and animals were taken to Europe were isolated exotics and lacked the normative authority in Spain: "Indians paraded before royal courts; like turkeys and parrots in cages were the innocent signifiers of an otherness that was ... exotic ... carrying no meaning" (Wasserman, 1984, p. 132).

The indigenous ecosystems were devastated as 'wild' because of developmental farming or pastoralism. The Native lived in harmony with the natural world, not to 'improve' it or use it for their own selfish motives. These views differ sharply from western concepts of land management, commercial farming, and putting the natural world to human service. Deloria's position on the issue of the conflict which results from a "rift between the spiritual 'owners' of the land, the Indians, and the political owners of the land, the whites" (Dunsmore, p. 415). This rift produces psychic, moral and political turbulence in the nation. For Deloria, stability lies in the reconciliation of the two approaches. The reaction of a Native American leader to the idea of farming shows the conflict between the two approaches:

You ask me to plow the ground ... Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? You ask me to cut grass, and make hay, and sell it and be rich like white men but how dare I cut my mother's hair? (Brown, 1970, p. 273)

The concept of private property especially of land was not in line with Native American cultures. Land, to Native Americans, was beyond any capitalist motive. Tecumseh, a chief of the Shawnee, says that a man cannot sell the land like "the sea or the air he breathed," says Josephy (1968, p. 283). The religious and spiritual beliefs of Native Americans stress the intermingling of the physical and spiritual worlds. Humans have spiritual as well as physical and mental components and the spirit lives beyond the death of the body (Locust, 1990, p. 221). These themes are eloquently and hauntingly expressed in an 1854 speech given to a government representative by Chief Seattle of the Suquamish tribe of what is now Washington State:

Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people ... when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe. (Seattle, 1994, pp. 287-289)

Analysis and Discussions

Alexie is intensely conscious of the Native Americans' problems rooted in the history of exploitation by the White colonizers. Victor and Adrian, in "Imagining the Reservation" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, speculate on the following rhetorical questions:

Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated over Washington D.C. would the urban Indians still be sprawled around the one-room apartment in the cable television reservation? Imagine a loaf of bread that could feed the entire tribe. Didn't you know Jesus Christ was a Spokane Indian? Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribes or another drowned him in the ocean. Would Lester Falls Apart still be shoplifting in the 7-11?" (p. 149)

The central question posed by Alexie in "Inside Dachau" where the narrator repeatedly asks "the great-grandchildren of Sand Creek and Wounded Knee": "What do we indigenous people want from our country?" (1996, pp. 119-20). And the answer comes in "Bob Coney's Island":

Let's begin with this: America.

I want it all back now, acre by acre, tonight. I want some Indian to learn to dance the Ghost Dance right so that all of the buffalo return and the white men are sent back home to their favorite European cities. (1996, p. 138, emphasis added)

Ghost Dance is a religious ritual of the Native Americans initiated by Wovoka (Jack Wilson) with a belief that the performance of the ritual would help revive the lost Native American culture and bring buffaloes in abundance. Various tribes modified the ritual according to their local/regional needs and Alexie uses it to adjust and incorporate the Spokane cultural needs: he welds the history with the present and the future. Alexie in his poetry vehemently challenges to Euro-Americanism because he is not here "bogged down in the euphemistic academic sterility that has plagued so much literature about the native people of this hemisphere" (Jaimes, 1992, p. 10). Alexie is environmental racist as he associates the annihilation of the Native American ecology with the inhuman White exploitation that produced "[a] dozen stories per acre" (1996, p. 12) as a result of wars with extreme imbalance of power, smallpox blankets, constitutional violence through Dawes Severalty Act and Indian Removal Act and a long series of acts like that to legalize robbery, massacre, and snatching of Indian lands. Consider the following extract from *Indian Killer*:

"You know about Bigfoot? The Sioux Indian?"

"Yeah," said Wilson. "He died at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. He was a

Minneconjou Sioux, I think. He was killed because he was leading the Ghost Dance ..."

"Yeah, and who killed Bigfoot? ..."

"Some soldier, I think. No one knows for sure."

"You are not paying attention. What color was the man who killed Bigfoot?"

"He would've been white."

"Exactly, Kasper. Think about that." (2008, emphasis added)

Alexie associates the annihilation of the Native Americans with the white race. The Euro-Americans brought diseases to the Americas as well as consciously spread small-pox through blankets but ironically the Native Americans themselves are theorized as responsible for the spread of diseases. Vine Deloria Jr. says that millions of carcasses in Alaska and Siberia should put the scientists

to the exploration and understanding of “the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna ... [and] massive planet-wide catastrophe”, the scientists have absurdly “concocted a theory that the legendary Paleo-Indians brought infectious diseases with them across the Bering Strait. These diseases, according to alleged scholars, were carried by “frogs, rats, birds, parasites, and other living baggage” that accompanied the Indians” (Deloria, 1997, p. xii). Deloria sarcastically criticizes the whites who themselves were responsible for the recent crisis of civilization but to justify colonial project as civilizing mission they misinterpret history as a misdeed of the Indians: “As a rule, species do not give diseases to other species except when the scholars require them to do so to bolster a theory that has no theory to support it” (p. xii). Alexie answers these so-called scholarly theoretical blemishing assumptions:

Sasquatch did not walk across the Bering Strait.

White America did not drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (1996, p. 109)

White America has been using the reservations of the Red Indians to dispose of uranium wastes. The experiments make her an atomic power and bring diseases for the Natives. Alexie’s mourns in “Memorial Day, 1972”

I was too young to clean graves So I waded into the uranium river Carrying the cat who later gave birth To headless kittens. (2000).

Native Americans have for centuries been living in harmony with Nature. But capitalist white America has incapacitated them to live with the natural world. The cats’ “headless kittens” may be literally true but metaphorically they are Native Americans themselves who are headless, without identity in white racist America. White men abandoned the mines quickly and for the Native were “left behind pools of dirty water, barrels of dirty tools, and mounds of dirty landfill. They taught us that dirty meant safe” (1996, p. 30). The uranium trucks kept throwing hot dust on the heads of the Indian children for two decades, who innocently kept waving to them with love. In that time so many Indians died that the Indians “learned to say cancer as like we said oxygen and love” (1996, p. 29). In “The Place Where Ghosts of Salmon Jump” Alexie critiques how the Spokane, Coeur d’ Alene and Palouse tribes lost their culture and sources of food. They lived along the Spokane River and lived on the salmon which have a characteristic way of reproduction: they swim against the flow of water and reach the mouth of the river, lay eggs and then flow back as fatless bodies which were then fished by the people settled along the bank causing least damage to the environment. What is progress for the whites is the collapse of the environment and its harmonious beauty for the Spokane. The Upper Falls Dam which was constructed in 1920 on the Spokane River, disabled the salmon to flow back against the flow of water, lay eggs and reproduce as they genetically have been doing for centuries. The dams snatched the fishing rights of the Natives and massive killing of buffaloes snatched their food and hides. For Alexie, “concrete [never] equals love” (1996, p. 19) – in the largest civilizational sense of the word, love implies interdependence of human and non-human entities which “the concrete dams” built by “the white men” who forget even to “... love their own mothers / So how could they love this river which gave birth / To a thousand lifetimes of salmon?” (1996).

Alexie plays upon the biblical concept of ‘fall’ – “These Falls have fallen farther” – suggesting that the presence of human beings on earth is not the result of ‘fall’; rather, ‘fall’ is the result of white man’s arrival in American paradise. The construction of dams transformed the Spokane falls’ millions of years old cycles of ‘love’ into graveyards where only “ghosts of salmon jump” now. The salmon stand for the dislocated and dispossessed Native Americans themselves. Therefore, in these graveyards, the ghosts of Native American mothers mourn because

Their children ... will never find their way back home,

Where I stand now and search for any kind of love,

Where I sing softly, under my breath, alone and angry. (1996, p. 19, emphasis added)

As Native Americans’ tribal life historically depended on hunting and fishing and they planned their seasonal movements according to fish migrations, Supreme Court decided that wildlife and fish were “not much less necessary to the existence of the Indians than the atmosphere they breathed” (law.jrank.org). Although Supreme Court intervened repeatedly to protect the fishing rights of the Indians and various laws and verdicts did contribute to the protection of their rights, they kept losing their natural environment as a result of the construction of dams which restricted the natural movements of the fish and hence the whole Native American way of life was lost. For Native Americans, the Spokane Falls signifies a history of losses because dams disrupted the life cycle of the salmon leading to the death of the tribal life dependent upon salmon. However, the ghosts of salmon in Alexie’s imagination still jump there and “ghosts of women mourn/ their children will never find their way back home” (1996, p. 19). Therefore, in “The Powwow at the End of the World” he gives a plan of (never) forgiving the whites who destroyed the Native American rich cultural life and resources:

I am told by many of you that I must forgive and so I shall after an Indian woman puts a shoulder to the Grand Coulee Dam and topples it; ... after the floodwaters burst each successive dam downriver from the Grand Coulee; .. after the salmon swims through the mouth of the Spokane River as it meets the Columbia, then upstream, until it arrives in the shallows of the secret bay on the reservation where I wait alone; ... after the salmon leaps into the night air above the water, throws a lightning bolt at the brush near my feet, and starts the fire which will lead all the lost Indians home. (1996, p. 98)

Alexie imaginatively retrieves what the Native American tribes lost as a result of the massacre of the buffaloes. Roughly 30-60 million bison roamed in pre-contact North America but their number drastically began to fall onwards from 1800. From 1872 to

1874, 5000 bison were killed a day, which is tantamount to killing of 5.4 million buffaloes in three years (retrieved on 9/1/2020). For Native American writers, Literature is an imagined alternative to the murderous and cruel white reality. Alexie conceives a field off the reservation where “[i]t rained buffalo” (1996, p. 18), which have been deprived of their natural environment of freedom, rendered “homeless” in their own continent. Phippen, tracing the history of the massacre of the American bison, relates

The Army wasn't in the business of guiding hunting trips for soft-skinned Wall Streeters, but it was in the business of controlling the Native Americans in the area, and that meant killing buffalo. One colonel, four years earlier, had told a wealthy hunter who felt a shiver of guilt after he shot 30 bulls in one trip: “Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.” (2016)

Historically, for carpeting roads, buffaloes were killed but the buffaloes in Alexie's imaginary world are “free / of injury” though “[c]onfused and homeless”. Now imprisoned in Spokane Walk Wild Zoo, the buffalo imprisoned behind the fence “stared / Intelligently / at white visitors who soon became very nervous. (1996, p. 18, emphasis added). “The buffalo's intelligent staring back” is Alexie's [and by implication, of Native American intellectual's] writing back to the colonial management of disposing of the fauna and flora of the regions where the Native American tribes lived.

Alexie keeps the White man only in the farthest margin of his creative writing because he considers the white colonization responsible for the Native American cultural and environmental crisis. He refers to some of the white figures by names. Some of the names from the progeny of the Euro-Americans Alexie directly refers to Walt Whitman, for instance, who is ‘insane’, ‘frightening’ and “ludicrous on the reservation” (p. 14). Indian boys who are otherwise masters of the game and like salmon play as if “the court were a river” (p.14) whereas Whitman is so stupid that he “cannot tell the difference between/offense and defense” (p. 15, emphasis added). Playing upon the title of his poem “Song of Myself” from *Leaves of Grass* (2002), Alexie in his poem “Song of Ourselves” reminds Whitman that while he “sang about his body, the still body/of one Indian grew into two, then ten, then multitudes” (p. 20). The implication is that while the most important white American poet was singing his greatest song of the white body, the Red Indians were struggling to save their race. In “Elegies” (p. 49) Alexie also mourns for General Armstrong Custer – probably ironically – who led the 7th Cavalry Regiment of US Army against the combined tribal forces of Lokata, Arapaho and Northern Cheyenne in the Great Sioux War (1876), also known as Custer's Last Stand or the Battle of Little Bighorn. And mostly he refers to the white colonizers with poetic indirectness as the following remark is a critique of the Columbus and his progeny and their effect on the environment, denotatively on one day, Columbus Day, and connotatively it covers the whole white-washed degradation of America: “Fourth of July and the air is heavy with smoke and whiskey” (Alexie, 1993).

Animals are a key feature of Native American mode of life and epistemology. Hirschfeld and Molin in *Encyclopedia of Native American Religions* describe the human-animal-environment relationship in the Native worldview as follows:

Prey animals ... who control long life and give medicine [are associated with six directions]: north is symbolized by the mountain lion; west, the bear; south, the badger; east, the wolf; above, the eagle; and below, the gopher or mole. Beast spirits ... are invoked and impersonated by curing societies during their retreats (p. 16).

Alexie takes up animals repeatedly in poem after poem but he treats them not separately from the history and the contemporary situation of the Native Americans. Bear is a symbol of protection, physical strength, and courageous leadership. Bear dances in California were performed to bring blessings of bear power to the community. Bear ceremonialism was practiced among Algonquian Indians of North America. Medicine men of Iroquois and Keresan Pueblo tribes also known as bears were powerful healers who cured disease caused by witchcraft. Alexie's bear in “Mistranslation of a Traditional Spokane Indian Song” is “quite convinced / that snow is most beautiful / on the midnight basketball court / of a reservation town / where the dark ghosts of Indian children / leave no trace of their passing” (p. 16). Likewise, Native Americans used porcupine as food in their hard times because it is the animal that is the easiest hunt in the forest. Its quills have antibiotic properties. Euro-Americans and Native Americans have contradictory attitudes to porcupine: “Whereas Indians saw in the porcupine a valuable resource, contemporary Americans have treated the animal as a pest that destroys property and damages timber” (Roze, p. 9). Rose traces the history of the killing of a porcupine:

For three winters beginning in 1957-58, the state of Vermont embarked on a porcupine poisoning program that led to the deaths of 10,800 animals (including 1700 that were shot). The poison used was sodium arsenite gel that was injected into apples. In 3 years, 32,000 poisoned apples were placed in porcupine dens. (Faulkner and Dodge 1962, cited in Roze, 2009, p. 8)

Alexie mourns the deaths of porcupines and associates the phenomenon with grandmother – metaphor of the matriarchal tradition of the Native American cultures – and the young protagonist of the poem “Grandmother, Porcupine, Traffic” who is unable to continue the tradition of respect for porcupine because he has to keep pace with the time in the changed cultural scenario of America but he understands that “[i]ts sharp quills were more useful than a road” (p. 31). When Big Mom found a porcupine lying dead on a road crushed by traffic, she stopped the traffic and dragged it away to pull out and collect its quills. Big Mom refers to matriarchal Native American cultures in harmony with fauna and flora and in contrast with masculine colonial patriarchy:

Big Mom loved porcupine

even as she grew too old to have the car stopped
and cried as she left porcupine alone on the road. (p. 31)

Carpeting of the roads destroyed the woods where porcupine lived and was a source of preserving biodiversity according to Roze (2009). Michael Sarazin (1727), Taylor (1935) and Rose himself have from the western scientific point of view studied porcupine. Thwaits (1907), Speck and Dexter (1951) have studied the cultural and economic relationship between Indians and their fauna and flora especially for the Micmacs of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and of the Montagnais of eastern Quebec, collectively known as the Porcupine Indians. Roze endorses them and candidly admits that the woods that suited porcupine did not suit timber traders and Native Americans did not consider it a pest:

To the Indian tribes that inhabited North America before the European settlement, the porcupine was a precious resource, treated with reverence by some. Among the woodland tribes, the porcupine held an important place in food gathering and the economy ... The vulnerable period in their hunting-fishing-gathering economy was early winter when ice restricted fishing but adequate snow cover had not yet accumulated for driving moose and caribou. Then the porcupine became a critical link in the Indians' survival. Along with the beaver, it remained the only animal that could be hunted with relative efficiency. (2009, p. 2)

Native Americans and the animals of their environment remained inextricably interlinked round the year throughout their life. Euro-American progress in the form of clearing of forests and carpeting of roads and massive cutting of trees deprived the Natives of the resource on which their lives depended.

Conclusion

Elizabeth-Cook-Lynn defines ecocide as "intentional destruction of the physical environment needed to sustain human health and life in a given geographical region" (Lundquist, 2004, p. 306). This breakdown of a man-nature relationship is the basic reason for the crisis of the Native Americans. For Alexie, "[i]magination ... is the first step toward a solution" (Adamson, 2001, p. 25); it can be an "escape ... a perfect door ... a song stronger than penicillin" (Alexie, 1994, pp. 152-53). Alexie's unlimited imagination keeps conceiving things differently to recover the relationship between Natives and their natural environment fractured by the white colonizers. A buffalo from behind the bars staring back into the eyes of white visitors in the zoo, salmon flowing back from the mouth of the Columbia river to a lonesome Red Indian waiting for her in the bay to give him three stories for laughter and food, a coyote smashing its paw with anger at inability to find a wife, a sasquatch wildly running with anger and frustration from one end of the jungle to the next and then into the center of a desert, small boys in the reservation, after melting the white snow 'soaking [it] kerosene' and 'lighting the match', playing basketball with socks on their hands and with thin hungry bellies till darkness when they can see neither hoop nor ball and so on and so forth are the expressions of exposition of and challenge to White racist destruction of pre-Columbian man-nature harmony. These imaginative solutions give Native courage and possibilities to configure the world differently. Countering western pedagogical practice of transferring placeless universals, Alexie's creative work is rooted in the particularity of time and place which raises consciousness for a more equitable society. Alexie's ecological perspective shows, to use Adamson's (2001) words, "everything connected to everything else" to practice creative imagination "to envision a middle place between local and universal ... to contest ... Western philosophies that separate science from the story, history from health, and economics from ecology" (p. 95).

The ecological disaster that Native America went through at the hands of White intruders put the heaviest brunt on the fauna and flora which in the American way of life cannot be separated from human beings, who were the actual target of the Euro-American annihilating onslaught. Animals in Alexie appear repeatedly for multiple interconnected purposes: assertion of horizontal relationship between humans and their environment, mourning at the loss of the life pattern that is lost, imaginative recovery of the lost harmony, writing back the Red truth to the White destructive civilization, giving the present Indian generation the understanding of what they have lost and suggesting them their way forward in the contemporary situation of dominantly white America. The protagonist of *The Summer of Blak Widows*, sitting with his beloved on "the hill above/ the reservation" (p. 11) is weaving a story around both of them to watch the first storm of the year approach, pass over then move away. (p.11)

Despite all dislocations and imposed migrations, they are sitting "safe and warm" (p. 11) on the hill with their skins exposed to the storm, an oxymoronic experience, but they have the conviction that the storm will move away and all their buffaloes will return.

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