

Hybridity for Survivance: A Postcolonial Reading of Sherman Alexie's *Flight*



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Abstract: *This study looks into the assimilation and hybridization of Natives in Euro-American culture in Sherman Alexie's Flight (2007). The study reveals that the hybridization of Native Americans is the ultimate consequence of innate resistance against abuse and marginalization in the post-contact world. The study endorses survival/endurance proximity, as suggested by Gerald Vizenor. The selected work, a magical realist text, narrates the quest of a Native American teenage boy Zits who, in search of his true identity, ultimately has reached his self-illumination. The study positions hybridity as an antidote to the essentialist position of purity and ethnicity. Zits' Native self is a victim of forced kidnapping and forged an identity in a post-contact multi-cultural society, hence 'mutual and mutable'. Employing Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a lens, the study magnifies the survivance of the protagonist in the contemporary world and analyzes the text through Greg Sarris' 'integrative approach'. The study illustrates that Alexie's text paves the way to a bridging position that helps the native-self rise from trauma and crisis of lacking intrinsicity in the contemporary western world.*

Key Words: Hybridity, Identity, Self, Assimilation, Survivance, Native Americans

Introduction

Sherman Alexie, the famous Native American poet, author and filmmaker, has a great contribution to developing the Native American voice in American society. He rejects the idea of 'vanishing' 'noble savage' and theorizes an authentic position for Native Americans. The post-contact native identity was being entangled in the trauma of the past, stereotypical misrepresentation, discursive subjugation of ideology, alcoholism and ethnic conflicts. *Flight* (2007) challenges the nihilistic subject position of the Native Americans. This article explores the destruction of the Native identity and the oppression of colonization which they have been facing since colonization. Alexie does not offer passive escapism; rather, he writes to "challenge, anger, and possibly offend." *Flight* narrates the story of a mixed-blood teenager who is half Native American and half Irish American. He is orphaned, seen adrift and manipulated in an institutional environment which subsequently throws him into marginalization, alienation and dislocation. Zits, a name suitable for his pockmarked skin, exhibits his trauma as an abandoned half-breed urban Indian,

dangling between whiteness and Indianness. Fourteen years old Zits, out of his last and twenty-first foster home, lands in jail, where he happens to meet a young white criminal, Justice, who convinces him to kill those who oppressed him. After mass murder in a bank, Zits is himself shot with a gun and ventures on a quest after dislocating in time by embodying into the past lives of young and old indigenous people, a pilot with terrorist agenda, an FBI agent in compliance with AIM (American Indian Movement), and his biological Native father. It endeavors to decenter the essentialist position of the "potent white" stereotype to nullify the white supremacy from an insider's experiential Spokane-Coeur d'Alene tribalist position. Alexie, himself a mixed-blood, was born in 1966 and brought up on the Spokane Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He was suffering from hydrocephalus when he was only six months old. The surgery was the only solution with high risks of death or mental impairment. Although the operation was successful but he suffered epileptic seizures and disfigurement. He repeatedly had medical treatments in his early life.

He survived the trauma and resolved to rewrite Native American histories.

To deconstruct the essentialist Euro-American position, the traditionalist approaches cling to a pure and unravished past identity. This study focuses on the issue of hybridization of the Native self and assimilation into Euro-American culture. For the suppressed, humiliated and vulnerable native self, hybridity is inevitable to survive. Homi K. Bhaba suggests that cultural identities are dynamic and cannot possibly be ascribed to a historical, static and pre-given cultural phenomenon. Neither "colonizers" nor the "colonized" are perceived as independent entities. Rather, there is a continual exchange and reciprocation of social and cultural performances which in turn can produce a mutual and mutable recognition in the face of cultural difference. Bhabha's notion of hybridity proposes the shift of the location of cultural identity and relocates it into the "liminal space," which lies in the dualities: self and other, European and the indigenous. It promotes the will to deviate from the stasis and to move to fluidity. Pulitano observes that theory should be "exclusively from Native American cultural and intellectual traditions" (Pulitano, 2003, pp. 2-3). She poses a challenge to an essentialist position, which cannot configure the counter critique for nullification of canonized epistemology. Also, she contends, the "intellectual sovereignty," which refers to tribal centric approach, can hardly do justice for survivance in such challenging and canonically occupied intellectual premises (Pulitano, 2003, pp. 59). For the propagation of a proper academic and institutional patronage, the art and artistic self require a proper platform. The study interrogates the essentialist positions which strengthen binaries and aim to promote the idea that bridging borders could be helpful in filling the ideological gaps as structuralist positions can fill the gaps in dialogic positions rendering resistance and counter critique emphatic. Hybridization collapses the unreal binaries of subject/object and genre barriers. From this critical angle, this study probes the text to answer some queries: How does the protagonist's quest for identity symbolically represent the resistance and Survivance of the American Indian Self in the post-contact world? To what extent does hybridity benefit the resistance and survival in the transformation of Zits, the protagonist
Flight?

Literature Review

Native Americans are supposed to assimilate into Euro-American culture in order to align themselves with mainstream society. However, this hybridization is meant to assert the native identity which is undermined by the whites in the process of colonization. The colonizers first presented the Natives as backward, illiterate and savage, and this misrepresentation became in 19th century America the part of the discourse. The idea of savagism was constructed to deprive Natives of their individuality. Roy Harvey Pearce exposed the ideology behind this savagism. Pearce considers savagism a strategy for othering Native Americans. He constructed the binary by saying that both are "realms apart" (Pearce, 1953, p. 103). The savage territory was considered to be an uncivilized and primitive state. Scott R. Lyons states that Native Americans were presented as uncivilized beings who were unable to survive in the civilized world and "destined to vanish" (Lyons, 2010, p. 210) because of their not entering into the contemporary world and having distinct traditions, social and cultural customs and religious practices, and even their patterns regarding trade and economy were not in harmony with the Euro-American ways and practices. This not only endangered the traditional Indian identity but even assimilating American Indians were believed to be the dregs of society, degenerated and drunken alcoholics. By limiting them to a certain geographical premise, the restraints of reservation kept them from mainstream American society. American popular media also served to prove the absence of Native Americans to strengthen the notion of The Vanishing Indian. Fenimore Cooper's American Indian character Chingachgook in *The Pioneers* (1823) reflects that actual Native Americans were believed to be uncivilized savages and the reasons for their extinction were war and migration. This idea of Vanishing Indians took one step further when Natives were forced to be merged into mainstream society. The forced emergence through kidnapping and boarding school strategies took away the sense of place and identity and left them displaced and confused. Jovana Petrovic's *Ethnic Identity in Thomas King's Green Grass, Running Water* shows this constitutional identity with the juxtaposition of two different ethnicities. If white Christian Americans are in the majority, Natives are in the minority. King dramatizes the struggle of the Natives in the U.S and Canada to survive in the conflict between Native

heritage and prevailing culture. Such traumatic conditions leave them marginalized and victims of the white bias. The dominant society wants to assimilate them without accepting their claim to full citizenship. King has woven the narrative by projecting his characters, which fluctuate between reservation lands and the outside world. The survival of the Native self was in danger and separatist approaches were unable to assert the Native self in the mainstream society. They were either misrepresented or forced to be assimilated. So in order to survive in this supremacy of the white race, to be part of prevailing culture hybridization was the only way out. Hybridity thus became a resistant strategy suggested by scholars and writers in literary and critical spheres. This theorization revisited native identity and, in the late twentieth century Vine Deloria, Leslie Mermon Silko, N. Scot Momaday and Gerald Vizenor resisted assimilation and annihilation of Native identity. *House Made of Dawn* (1969) by Momaday and [Silko's *Ceremony* \(1977\)](#) rewrite histories to assert the distinct culture and identity of Native Americans. Tayo's illness in *Ceremony* (1977) is the result of loneliness in white society. The only solution is a merger: "white people are only tools ... we can deal with white people, with their machines and beliefs ([Silko, 1977, p. 132](#)).

The fissure is created in canon with the deconstruction of the term "Indian," and many scholars and writers work on it. The enormous contribution in this sphere is by Native American novelist and critic Gerald Robert Vizenor. His works challenged the fundamentalist approaches to history. Vizenor has employed the idea of "invented Indian," the identity created by Euro-Americans. In order to maintain the actualization of the Native self, it is necessary to practice and acknowledge hybridity. Vizenor's debut novel which was first published as, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bear Heart* (1978) and afterwards named *Bearheart* decenters the prevailing metanarrative regarding the term Indian. The fiction he wrote is full of wordplay and puns. His magical realist texts follow wild imagination in trickster discourse and rewrite the prevailing mainstream definitions. One of the characters asked about the meaning of Indian. The other replied: "Indian is nothing more than an invention ... Are you speaking as an invention?" ([Vizenor, 1978, p. 195](#)). Vizenor suggested that one should be liberated from all social, cultural, ethnic and racial prejudices and embrace harmony to be heard in the mainstream society. In *The*

Heirs of Columbus (1991), Vizenor re-makes the set of experiences encompassing Christopher Columbus' exploration history. He recreates the persona of Columbus as a Mayan trickster healer. In this appropriation, the narrative works as counter-discourse. The trickster mode of the narrative presents Columbus as a mixed-blood Mayan to question the fundamental privilege of race. So the idea of purity is lost and a hybrid self emerges without any privilege in race and color. "Sovereignty is neither fence nor feather ... the very essence of sovereignty is communal laser" (Vizenor, 1991, p. 62). The utopia offers a new kind of survival marked with endurance. A "New World" won with the tool of "survivalance". "Vizenor traces "tribal genes back to the New World ..." ([Vizenor, 1991, p. 9](#)). Vizenor's concept of 'survivalance' offers a significant form of resistance. In *Fugitive Poses* (1998), he writes: "[S]urvivalance, in the sense of Native survivalance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response ... survivalance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and 'victimry'" ([Vizenor, 1998, p. 15](#)). The New World is marked by a new identity, with a new approach towards the western world. What Vizenor has established as a theory, Sherman Alexie has demonstrated in his fiction how this process of survivalance is achieved and accomplished by the Native subjects. Alexie investigates hopelessness, destitution, viciousness and drunkenness among Native Americans through these inquiries in the current scenario of his age. The protagonists in the majority of his writings display a consistent battle between themselves and their mitigated weak and powerless identity and become the victim of despair in Euro-American culture.

Alexie's novels are emblematic of the rewriting of Native American history. In *Reservation Blues* (1995), people belonging to different tribes – Spokane, Lakota and Flathead – collectively construct the pan-Indian alliance. But Alexie recommends the complementarity, the design he offers in the characters of Big Mom and Catholic cleric Father Arnold as Big Mom represents Indian and Father Arnold represents the Christian side and they say: "We'll make an incredible team" ([Alexie, 1995, p. 280](#)). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009) narrates the assimilation of a Native American young boy, Arnold Junior, into the white culture. He, by crossing social, political and racial borders, establishes reciprocity between the white community and the Indian

reservation. In order to proclaim an intelligent and diligent identity, it is important that assimilated Native Americans should be aware of their traditions and have the capability to survive in mainstream society. The solutions are given by Alexie in *The Summer of Black Windows* (1996), where unconventional verse works questions colonization. Ghulam Murtaza and Shaheena Ayub Bhati, in their article "Sherman Alexie's Discursive Reconstruction of the Native American Subject" (2016), observe "the Native American subject has to adjust itself in the globalized westernized Euro-American socio-cultural scenario." Even though they are not part of mainstream society, hybridity can help them attain "standards and requirements of modern civilization" (Murtaza & Bhatti, 2016, p.37). Thus resistance strategies are amalgamated with survival proximity to enter the new world full of liberty and respect. Alexie's counter-representation decenters the 'potent White' generalization of the 'vanishing Noble Savage.' He migrates from the margin to the middle; he employs humor to mitigate the traumatic connotations and light-heartedly reconciles the two races through syncretism that in Alexie serves to reconstruct the Native American identity.

Conceptual Framework

Homi K. Bhabha's view of hybridity formulates the framework of this article. Pulitano's analysis of Greg Sarris' "integrative approach" and Gerald Vizenor's survivance. Bhabha's notion of hybridity refers to a "liminal" state of identity which ultimately assimilates in order to be mutual and mutable. Bhabha builds up his idea of hybridity in response to colonial governance in the condition of antagonism to the colonial agenda (Bhabha 1994). Hybrid identity is the measure in which the colonial administration translates the character of the colonized (other) inside an all-inclusive structure, creating something natural (Papastergiadis 1997). Bhabha says that this mixed personality rose out of the amalgamation of the sensibilities of colonizer and colonized, testing the authenticity of essentialist social character. For Bhabha, hybrid identity is the remedy against essentialism. For him, "all forms of culture are continually in the process of hybridity" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). Stuart Hall endorses this intermixing, suggesting that identity 'production' "is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1989, pp. 230-232). Bhabha places hybridity in the middle of the space where the

"cutting edge of translation and negotiation" happens, and which he terms the third space (Rutherford 1990) which resists assimilation and retains its idiosyncrasy in resistance. The notion of post-colonial is a misfit here. Kaplan suggests that a "Eurocentric notion of post-coloniality" (Kaplan, 1996, p. 17) cannot be applied to the historiography of American imperialism. Both locally and away, the United States successfully predominates in a power relation that is considered neocolonial. Even Arnold Krupat maintains that in the desire to make Native American literature resistant literature among the pieces of literature which are written and categorized as "postcolonial works of literature," the worth demonstrating is the fact that "post" is nothing other than an illusion (p. 30). Craig Womack gave a separatist and tribal-centric approach. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) proposes literary separatism and tribal nationalism, with roots in tradition, waging war against the west by remaining isolated from the contemporary global condition. To Pulitano, "tribal-centric" approaches engage the Natives in a constant war-like position but this war cannot be waged with the "Red stick" theory. She says that Womack, Warrior "seems to neglect the complexity" of hybridization "in the fashion of cultural translation." (Pulitano, 2003, p. 61). Pulitano considers these approaches essentialist and anti-theoretical, and consequently anti-intellectual" (Pulitano, 2003, p. 61). To incorporate her stance in the strategic plan of "anti-imperial translation" (Krupat, 1996, p. 32), Pulitano refers to Carlton Smith who analyses Frederick Jackson Turner's work to highlight the suppression of "Other." By adopting Bhabha's "third space" as an interpretative lens, Smith reads the Turtle Mountain series of novels by Louis Erdrich. Though Pulitano criticizes main post-colonial theorists for excluding Native Americans from resistance strategies on the basis of their cultural specificities, she argues that "cultural specificity does not exclude some very real cultural commonalities" (Pulitano, 2003, p. 10). Heavily influenced by post-structuralism, Vizenor has also presented a middle way. Pulitano endorses Vizenor's trickster discourse: "Vizenor's trickster discourse frees him ... the ability of storytelling [is employed] to liberate and to create" (Pulitano, 2003, p. 152). So he takes up oral stories that most fundamentally point out change, keeping the ideas of Indian-ness tricky and consistently on the verge of growing, however never completely present.

Vizenor keeps away from "terminal creeds" and commends "survance."

Greg Sarris' *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (1993) presents a critical angle that incorporates oral custom inside the composition that is written text and an endeavor to make morals in storytelling and oral tradition justifiable for a Euro-western audience. Sarris keeps up those social practices that can be seen distinctly in their living settings and context. Sarris' method is more applicable in linguistic strategies as it rests upon the dialogic point of view: the purpose "is to open a dialogue" (Sarris, 1993, pp. 87-88). This is how hybridization works: it opens a new avenue where the Native subject is no longer alien.

Analysis

Sherman *Alexie's Flight* (2007) opens with the presence of a fifteen-year-old boy saying to his audience, "Call me Zits" (Alexie, 2007, p.1). And he sounds very discouraged and with low self-esteem because he says, "My real name is not important" (Alexie, 2007, p. 1) and he defines himself entirely by the "forty-seven" pimples that dot his skin. The distorted skin suggests that Native American identity is stigmatized and it has so many zits of being savage, uncivilized, primitive, degenerated, backward, illiterate, and so on. The narration reveals how the Native personality is nullified as a victim of self-doubt. Zits thinks his acne is due to genetics: his Native American father had a similarly "ruined complexion," and Zits calls himself "ugly"—"ashamed" of his Indian-raced face (Alexie, 2007, p. 4). Zits wishes to be like a boy with "blue eyes and blond hair." He says: "I want to be him" (Alexie, 2007, p. 158). Here we see that contrived binaries are projected because the marginalization had its basis in ethnic and hegemonic proclamations. The novel presents the post-contact situation of a mixed-blood native who is unhappy with this dual identity: "... I'm not really Irish or Indian. I'm a blank in the sky, a human solar eclipse" (Alexie, 2007, p. 5). In this collision of binaries, Alexie has presented the tussle between the two races: The traditionalist Native identity rejects Western empirical knowledge, which ignores the power of the sacred. Identity resides in the hegemonic supremacy of whiteness which discriminates colored "self," blaming it as less privileged (Pulitano, 2003, p. 44). The protagonist is in that state of resistance where he exhibits Womack's categorical dismissal of assimilation and forceful endorsement of the necessity

of a "Native American literary separatism" (Pulitano, 2003, p. 59). Zits' painful trauma is the result of "the reductionist point of view," the discursive presentation "according to their Western perspective" (Mates 2011, p. 126). Zits has to transform himself in order to get his self-recognition. As his ways are full of "Blood Sweat and Tears," but he is ready to get rid of his "zits," and he offers his back zits for sale to a clear-skinned girl who should be reminded of how lucky she is for having clear skin. The protagonist is ready to embark on the journey of transformation where not merely Natives but Whites also cannot stay "in a manner fully independent of one another" (Krupat, 1996, p. 18). The mainstream society measures beauty in terms of white standards. Replete with white standards, this society does not give equal rights to colored people. Zits is crushed in such scenarios: "Yes, that is my life, a series of cruel bastards and airplane crashes." He is full of self-hatred, the constant failures and alienation make him confused: "Twenty little airplane crashes. I'm a flaming jet, crashing into each new foster family" (Alexie, 2007, p. 11). Zits trusted Justice, the White guy, and opened his heart before. He talks to him like his close friend, who is equally aware of his dilemma. He admitted that his people "nearly destroyed your people. This country, the so-called United States, is evil". But Justice gave the solution of the use of violence which is ultimately venomous.

Dwelling his strategic resistance in "survance," which is called by Gerald Vizenor a combination of survival and resistance, Zits has learned through the process of struggle for survival and resistance against odds. Even though he has no singular method of survance: Vizenor perceives it as a practice and does not offer it as an ideology, nor does he present it as a theory. For him, the remaking of the Native self is possible with the help of "survance in creative literature" (Vizenor, 2008, p. 11). For Alexie, survival is earned by interpretation; it is an effort to claim the consent for *Flight*. In order to make that determination, the plotting of Zits' movement toward survance is crucial to our understanding of how a mixed-blood American Indian teen, alone in the world, with only a few meager possessions, extricates himself from the "unbearable sentiments of tragedy" (Alexie, 2007, p. 1). In this dismantling of binaries, Zits has a desire to be like his counterparts. His desire that he may look more like his mother and his admiration for Justice, show his ambivalence, the first

step towards a hybrid identity. For Bhabha, ambivalence is the complex mixture of inspiration and repulsion that formulates the relationship between self and other, colonizer and colonized described by Homi Bhabha. The fear and awe led Zit's personality to be assimilated. Hybrid identities may get open access to earlier prohibited areas. Zits' transformation let him move into past where his native identity suffered severe injustice: as a white FBI agent, standing in an in-between situation where 'a complex, on-going negotiation seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in a moment of historical transformation' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). The transformation from a holocaust into a personality is marked with endurance. From his first transformation into the body of Hank Storm till the last one, he is in constant flux. In Vizenor's concept of Survivance, there is a need to transform from "an Indian into "post-Indian," as Indian for him is allegedly misconstrued to make Natives ashamed of their Past. When Zits shifts into the body of a young native American boy, he is appalled and shocked by the brutality. The transformation of Zits in Jimmy tends towards assimilation: he is getting close to Euro-American thought, not taking with him his tradition anymore. When he was with Abbad drinking beer, he talked about religion, politics and Football" (Alexie, 2007, p. 129). The final Transformation is the most significant: he who chose to hate his father, now comes to know about his problem. We see he empathizes and his quest is complete: "I used to hate rain. But now I want to pour ... I want to be clean" (Alexie, 2007, p. 159). In

cleaning one's self, it is necessary to be a part of the present, but the denial of the past is not recommended. Alexie does not deny the tradition but he does not let Indianness be toxic reminiscent of Natives; rather, he wants them to overturn the tragic vision of 'victimry' (Pulitano, 2007, p. 152). Finally, in Zits' character, the culmination of his quest, he concludes his "self." Taking his legacy with him, he chooses to be a part of the present. He is no more ashamed of him but after getting his Zits scrubbed, he is now Michael. In poetics of resistance, Vizenor proposes 'post-Indians' who create a Native presence" (Pulitano, 2007, p. 152). But he sees them in both "reversions and futurity" (Lee, 2003, p. 84). He knows his real name now, and in this name he "might get unlonely" (Alexie, 2007, p. 180). For Sarris, stories are meant for others to change their perspectives about us, but it needs a transformation on our part as well. The hybrid identity of Zits has made the world "unlonely" for him.

Conclusion

Native Americans are striving to undercut the stereotypes associated with them. Their survivance is no less than a part of resistance strategy by assimilating into the world of privilege. Their adoption of western ways results in hybridization. This hybridity is not to be condemned if it gives birth to scholars like Sherman Alexie, Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Mermon Silko, Louis Erdrich and many others. If hybridity makes voices resonant, hybridity is not to be denounced.

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