

**Native American Women in Sherman Alexie's Short Stories:  
Stereotypical Representations**

**Ahmed S. Lafi**

**DISSERTAÇÃO DE  
MESTRADO EM LÍNGUAS, LITERATURAS E CULTURAS**

**Nota:** lombada (nome, título, ano)  
- encadernação térmica -

**Novembro de 2013**

## INTRODUCTION:

This study aims to examine how Native American women are depicted in three short stories collections written by Sherman Alexie namely, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Firstfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Those volumes portray women whose manners, thoughts and character reflect dominant perceptions about Native Americans and some of them play the devil's advocate. The study of the Native female representations will investigate how the author negotiates internalized racism and domination. One will argue that Sherman Alexie's depiction of Native American women in his short stories entails a subtle understanding of how those women view themselves through (and within) the constructs of Otherness, which were enforced by Western stereotypical notions concerning Native Americans. Alexie has no problem presenting these women as implicit or explicit stereotypes. Although living under the domination of mainstream fallacies about Native Americans, those women have successfully managed to internalize their indigenous identity as a significant act of survival. Native Americans have been living under the Eurocentric colonial agenda for so long that they have internalized racism, and thus they have, consciously or not, incorporated stereotypical manners and representations as part of who they are and what they are. Resistance, however, is also inevitable.

In general, Sherman Alexie's readers "feel uncomfortable with his racial portrayals or see them as stereotypes," (Blewster 2009: 82) which may obscure, for the readers, any sincere attempt at social reform and raising awareness. Actually, the attempt to understand these characters while taking into consideration internalized racism helps to understand the social representations and pressures that those characters undergo in their attempt to assert or define their identity. Talking about the mixed feelings tribal people have about his writings, Alexie pinpoints why they resist the notion of any successful Native American writer: "A lot of people are so dysfunctional, to the point they believe that any Indian striving for success becomes white, that failure is an American Indian attribute. They've internalized the colonialism so much, they've internalized the stereotype so much, that they think any effort toward success is white." (Blewster 2009: 77) Thus, this study will examine how Native American women characters in Alexie's short stories show signs of internalized racism, an aspect which Alexie thinks to be peculiar to Native Americans in general.

Lisa M. Poupart, in her essay "The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians," explains how internalized racism becomes self-inflicted and self-imposed:

American Indian people learned and internalized the discursive practices of the West—the very codes that created, reflected, and reproduced our oppression. As American Indians participate in, create, and reproduce Western cultural forms, we internalize Western meanings of difference and abject Otherness. (2003: 87)

On the other hand, Karen D. Pyke, in her study “What Is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don’t We Study It?”, draws attention to the “hidden injuries” of internalized oppression and insists that this has been treated like a taboo: “The internalization of racial oppression among the racially subordinated and its contribution to the reproduction of racial inequality has been largely ignored.” (2010: 551) The notion of the internalization of conflict and domination among marginalized groups or minorities has been the subject of scholarly discussion in different areas as well as from an interdisciplinary perspective (Spivak 1988; Taylor & Grundy 1996; Pyke 2003). In this study, one will use the notion of internalized racism since this may help to understand the stereotypical attitudes and representations of the women characters that are depicted in Alexie’s selected short stories.

Chapter One presents a biographical account of Alexie’s life and literary production. It sheds light on how the representation of Native American women is an overriding concern for Alexie. It also explores how his literary works speak to the dysfunctional life at the reservation and how to dismantle stereotypical representations. Chapter Two introduces and describes the notion of internalization and the theoretical framework. In addition it analyses the concepts of stereotypical representation and how they can be applied to literature, and particularly how similar issues are used (or not) in Native American literature in general. This will be followed by a survey of scholarly opinion about Sherman Alexie’s literary production and how stereotypical representations occupy an overriding place in his work. Chapter Three examines the stereotypical representations of Native American women in a selected set of short stories from Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and *Ten Little Indians*. Finally, and in conclusion, one will expect to show how Sherman Alexie’s representation of Native American women may help to understand his position as a Native American writer who feels he has the responsibility to avoid the fact that native Americans are perhaps one of the ethnic groups which are more prone to be misrepresented, misunderstood and appropriated. Notably important, this study will examine the image of Native women in selected stories from the three above mentioned short stories collections. The fourth and most recent collection, which is *War*

*Dances* (2009), will not be examined in this study due to space and time restrictions but also because it is significantly not an exclusive book of short stories but it includes poems as well.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **A Biographical Account of Sherman Alexie's Life and Literary Contribution**

Sherman Alexie was born in Wellpinit in 1966 to a family where drinking kept the father, a Coeur d'Alene Indian, away for days from the warmth of his home with no financial support and to a mother, a Spokane Indian descent, who took upon herself to do sewing and work as a clerk at the same time to raise her 6 children. Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington State. With a population of one thousand people, the Reservation was economically ruled by two factors that had a negative outcome and downfall of the wealth on the reserve. Alexie describes the people as "Salmon people. Our religions, our cultures, our dancing, our singing-had everything to do with the salmon. We were devastated by the Grand Coulee Dam. It took 7,000 miles of salmon spawning beds from the interior Indians in Washington, Idaho and Montana." (*Apud* Grassian 2005: 1) The other factor that brought about an economic collapse was the establishment of casinos: "on my reservation, there was about 90 percent unemployment before bingo halls and casinos; now it's about 10 percent." (Grassian 2005: 1) Growing up in these times of change, Alexie was conscious of social illnesses that have constantly plagued the reservations.

Obviously, raising a family of 6 in a reservation was not an easy task. To add to the worries of life for Alexie's mother, he was born with a deformity. He was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, "a life-threatening condition marked by an abnormally large amount of cerebrospinal fluid in the cranial cavity." (Grassian 2005: 1) At the age of 6 months he undertook a surgery which left the doctors doubtful of his chances of survival, and if he did make it would not be without mental handicaps. He proved them all wrong. Although he was able to beat all odds and outlived all negative expectations, his childhood did not go without serious side effects. The worst he suffered was an enlarged skull and constant seizures but bed wetting was the most embarrassing. At school, he was frequently bullied and made fun of. Students named him "the globe" (Grassian 2005: 2) due to the size of his head. Given these circumstances, he found retreat and comfort in books. By the age of 12, he had read all the books in his school library. Reading for him was more than a means to increase his knowledge; it proved to be a useful tactic. He equipped himself with humour

as a tool to shield off the abuse of others as a means of psychological empowering. His logic was: “You can’t run as fast or throw a punch if you’re laughing [...] Humour is self defence on the rez. You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak upon them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh.” (*Apud* Grassian 2005: 2) Humour worked as his strategy to throw back at those who attempted to bully him. He succeeded in retaliating against any scornful lashes from others by employing witting and humorous retorts.

For the most part of the early years in school, Alexie attended mostly white schools and was trained within formal, mainstream education. His mother believed that the only way to be perfectly proficient in English was assimilation. His excellence shined bright like a diamond, he excelled in school both academically and athletically. He became “a star player on the school’s basketball team, as well as the team captain, class president, and a member of the championship debate team.” (Grassian 2005: 2) Although he was the only non-white student, in his case the only Native American in school beside the school’s mascot, he blended in quite well. However, things were not any different after finishing high school. For his university education, he picked the predominantly white Gonzaga University, a Jesuit school in Spokane. Very similar to his high school in so many different ways, Alexie found it a bit hard to be part of the mainstream and blend in. He did not like the environment altogether. Nonetheless, two years later while in his sophomore year he dropped out of school completely. This time, however, not because he was dissatisfied with his surroundings but, like his father, he drowned into a drinking abyss. He became an alcoholic. In an interview with Michael Lieberman, Sherman shares his drinking issues. When asked by Lieberman of when he began to label himself an alcoholic, Sherman says the following:

Oh, a case of beer a day. You know, I could drink a fifth of tequila a day. You know, it becomes a drinking problem when it affects your relationships with people, when it affects your job or your school, your grade point average. You know, affects your, it’s a drinking problem when you’re sitting on your couch at home drinking the case of beer all by yourself, and then you pass out and grab the fifth of tequila when you wake up. So pretty obvious what my problem was. (“From Sherman Alexie at Big Think”)

Alexie’s mother also struggled with drinking problems but she was eventually able to come out triumphant: “Alexie’s mother eventually came to terms with her drinking problem and even became a counselor for other recovering alcoholics on the reservation” (Sonneborn 2013: 14). However, looking back at his experience with drinking, Alexie lashes out at his father who played

a bad role model: “Both his parents also severely abused alcohol. As Alexie explained in 2007 on the radio show *Morning Edition*, ‘On my reservation, in my family, alcoholism was epidemic.’ Nearly all of his many relatives on the reservation had drinking problems. Some even died of alcohol-related illnesses or accidents. The death that most affected Alexie was that on his eldest sister.” (Sonneborn 2013: 14) In an interview with Jess Smiley, Alexie describes his father’s long history with alcoholism:

My father was a randomly employed blue collar alcoholic, and was said to spend what little money there was on buying alcoholic drinks. [He] drank away from home a lot and [I] used to lack sleep since [I] would stay up waiting for [my] father than fall asleep [...] When my father would leave on binge drinking, he’d be gone for days or weeks. A couple of times, he was actually gone for a few months [...] I wouldn’t want to go to sleep in case he came back home, so I would stay awake waiting for him. (“An Hour with Sherman Alexie”)

Unfortunately, his father never recovered. In fact most of his relatives are also heavy drinkers, which he chronicles in his poetry. In other words, family life and cultural background inform a great deal of his writing: “Characters with familiar family names reappear in Alexie’s works formulating a fascinating social field of reservation and urban Indian life within the state of Washington.” (Lundquist 2004: 151)

Regarding Alexie’s addiction problem, Lynn Cline argues that it was a latent psychological problem that induced his drinking rampage: “It was the feeling of inferiority at university which made him drink heavily. While he moved among rich white students, Alexie [felt] like a second class citizen” and started to drink (2000: 197). He remained an alcoholic for five years, a fate that was soon to change. After moving to Seattle to work as a busboy, he underwent an incident that changed the course of his life, an awakening experience. After his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday he was robbed at knifepoint. He began to believe life was too short to be wasted and rushed to act upon it. He enrolled in the Medical School of Washington State University but he found that his constant fainting in class would hold him back from being a doctor, so he joined a poetry-writing workshop with Alex Kuo. It was in this class that he encountered his first volume of Native American poetry, *Songs from This Earth on Turtle’s Back*. The experience was an epiphany for him. Being inspired by this experience and at the urging of his instructor, Alexie decided to pursue writing as a career.

In 1991 Alexie took his bachelor’s from Washington State. In 1992, a publisher agreed to publish a collection of his poetry known as *The Business of Fancy Dancing*. Motivated by this success, the day the work was published was the same day Alexie chose to quit drinking. On the

issue of alcoholism and creativity, and when interviewed by Lieberman and asked whether alcohol ultimately helps or hinders writers, Sherman's response stems from his own personal experience but it has a generalizing effect as he broadly speaks of the ambivalent experience of drinking in relation to creativity:

Well, I wrote *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Business of Fancy Dancing* while drunk and drinking. So there's certainly a lot to be said for my desperate years, my alcoholic years, my active alcoholic years as being the source of some pretty good work, for being the source of the two books that established and made my career. But the thing is, it's unsustainable. You know, if you are using substances to fuel your creativity, you're going to have a very, very short artistic life. You're going to be a sprinter and by and large, I wanted to become a marathon runner [...] So, it's unsustainable, you know, it's sort of like the environment, you can only pour so much pollutants into it before the temperature changes dramatically. So I think drug and alcohol abuse is like the greenhouse effect for writers. ("From Sherman Alexie at Big Think")

Alexie does not deny the fact that he comes from a family which abused alcohol, and he says the whole reservation was on the same boat for that matter. And the stereotypical image of most people on the reservations is one in which there are alcohol problems: "When he is criticized for portraying stereotypes of alcoholism or violence among Native Americans, Alexie scoffs at any 'romantic fool' who has not seen the damage caused by alcohol abuse and this environment of poverty and despair." (Donovan 2012: 20) Lieberman asks if Alexie feels an obligation or commitment towards the Native American community to address the issue of alcoholism. To this Sherman says the following:

Well, I mean, I'm an alcoholic, that's what, you know, my family is filled with alcoholics. My tribe is filled with alcoholics. The whole race is filled with alcoholics. For those Indians who try to pretend it's a stereotype, they're in deep, deep denial. It's an everyday part of my life and as a writer, I use that to write about it. You know, partly for fictional purposes, and narrative purposes, but partly with the social hope that by writing about it, maybe it'll help people get sober, and it has. I've heard from them. You know, the social function of art is very important to me. It's not just for art's sake. I have very specific ideas in mind about what it can do. I've seen it happen. So it is writing about alcohol that helps me stay sober. And I think reading about alcoholism helps other people stay sober. ("From Sherman Alexie at Big Think")

Alexie writes to influence. He hopes those who read his work will be affected by his real life experiences and aspire to change. He stresses that writing magically works as his cure to stay

sober and alert. His work was well received by the audience, but with some concern about his depictions of stereotypes, an aspect to which he responded in several interviews:

Alexie responds to criticisms concerning the depiction of alcoholism, despair, and stereotypes in his early works. In his 2006 radio interview with Lorena Allam, for instance, Alexie insists, ‘The idea of the drunken Indian is not a stereotype – it’s damp reality.’ In his 1997 interview with Charlene Teters, Alexie talks about being ‘accused of exaggerating the despair on the reservation’ in his written work, which he goes on to refute by pointing to ‘the alcohol and drug problems’ he sees there and the level of denial that makes it difficult to address. (Peterson 1996: xi)

Meanwhile, his early work received praise from James Kincaid who called Alexie “one of the major lyric voices of our time.” (*Apud* Lundquist 2004: 152) The critical acclaim he received gave him a boost to write more. In 1993 his third book of poetry *First Indian on the Moon* came out.

Urged by his publisher, Alexie started writing his first fiction manuscript. The reservations and the lives of Native Americans continued to be a never drying fountain of inspiration. Alexie explains the process of writing “in three months, in between the review and when I submitted the book to agents [I] wrote *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight*.” (Grassian 2005: 4) This book was so popular that it put him in the finalist place for the Pen/Hemingway award. He followed it by *Reservation Blue* which won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award (1995). In 1996, he wrote *Indian Killer*, a novel which was followed by the collection of poetry *The Summer of Black Widows* in the same year. The year 1996 was a lucky year for him; he was honoured by Granta magazine and was recognized as one of the twenty best American novelists under the age of 40. His reaction to this literary honour was a humorous one; he comments that the only reason why they gave him this award he mentions is “because they needed a brown guy.” (Grassian 2005: 3)

After 1996, his career took a different path, which was not any easy adjustment to make. He decided to embark on writing screenplays. Alexie explains “in writing books I am the Fidel Castro of my world. I determine everything. In the film making project, I’m more like the senator from Wyoming. So getting used to that took some time.” (Grassian 2005: 4-5) He based the screenplay of the film *Smoke Signals* on a selected collection from *The Lone Ranger*. The production resulted in the feature film *Smoke Signals* that came out in 1998. It proved to be a great success and won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998. It also won him a nomination for the Grand Jury Prize. Though the movie was a hit, he nevertheless feared his



involvement in the motion picture industry would affect his literary perspective. He worried about the accessibility of his writing and its potential for film adaptation. Therefore, he decided

to make movies in the same way that I write books; all by myself, with all my inaccessible bullshit, all of my good and bad writing, and most of the soul I have left intact. I am going to make very cheap movies on videos, and manufacture and distribute the videos all by myself, free from as many corporate influences as possible. (Grassian 2005: 7)

His passion for fiction and poetry did not fluctuate. In 2000, he wrote *One Stick Long*, a collection of poetry, one year later *the Toughest Indian in the World* (short stories) and in 2003 *Ten Little Indians* (short stories). He also wrote, produced and directed the film *The Business of Fancymaking* in 2002, which depicts a gay Indian's trip back to his Reservation. This journey for the gay Indian is an attempt to re-evaluate his childhood and identity. Alexie's career path does not stop at writing fiction, producing feature movies or writing poetry. In fact, at one point he decided to work on his stage persona through poetry reading and succeeded in doing so. He won the Taos Poetry Circus World Heavyweight Championship three years in a row 2000-2002. As part of his future plans, Alexie plans on writing a biography of Jimi Hendrix and a memoir of his own family history down from his grandfather who died in the Second World War up to his own children. As versatile as he is, a poet, a short-story teller, a novelist, a screenwriter and a filmmaker, Alexie remains faithful to the literary forms he first started with: "the first two things are very natural [...] it is like breathing for me. I really have to struggle with novels with novels. If I never had to write another novel again, I'd be happy. I like the contained world." (Grassian 2005: 7)

Alexie, however, continued to be quite a prolific writer in the following years. In 2005, he published another poetry collection titled *Dangerous Astronomy* and in 2009 he published yet another poetry book called *Face*. In 2007, he published two books: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (young adult literature), which won the 2007 National Book Award, and in the same year he published the novel *Flight*.

Alexie won fast ascendancy among Native American writers: "Alexie's writing is known, for among other things, portraying the realities of life for contemporary reservation and urban Indians - unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, death, humor, popular culture, history, and anger, to name just a few of the themes." (Hollrah 2004: 121) Living between two worlds continues to be his overriding literary concern:

He continues his themes, from two previous books of poetry, of exploring the paradoxes of living on and off the reservation, of home and family, love affairs, sorrow and loss,

helplessness and forgiveness. Some of his stories are full of despair; others are downright bleak. His direct honesty prevails and we are required to think and listen and think again even as we smile and laugh. (Baxter 1994: 277)

By depicting Indian themes and characters, Sherman hopes to influence and address Indian children who are mostly taken by mainstream white popular culture. As a compromise, and to speak in a language they understand, Sherman usually adds a touch of modern day TV culture to his Indian themes. He mentions names of TV shows, movies and music. He explains that “it’s the cultural currency [...] Superman means something different to me than it does to a white guy from Ames, Iowa, or New York City or LA. It’s a way for us to sit at the same table. I use pop culture like most poets use Latin [...] TV is the only thing that keeps us vaguely in democracy even if it in the hands of the corporate culture.” (Grassian 2005: 6)

Although most of his characters are depicted from his Spokane reservation, like the recurring storyteller, for him his identity is formed by the fact that he is Native American, which defines his writing: “If I write it, it’s an Indian novel. If I wrote about Martians, it would be an Indian novel, if I wrote about the Amish, it would be an Indian novel. That’s who I am [...] I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians.” (Grassian 2005: 7) Alexie dramatizes his predominant concern with Native American identity by utilizing humor. In this sense humour becomes politicized and geared towards identity assertions:

One way that Alexie and many other Indian writers disrupt colonial influences is by playing the role of a trickster, an important figure in many Native cultures. While the role of the trickster varies from tribe to tribe, he generally ‘has a familiar set of characteristics: he plays tricks and is the victim of tricks; he is amoral and has strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous, but somehow always sympathetic if not lovable. (Grassian 2005: 11)

However, not all critics feel comfortable about Alexie’s use of humor and stereotypes. Stephen F. Evans argues that Alexie “came under fire from certain quarters for his purportedly negative use of irony and satire – namely, literary connections to (white) popular culture and representations of Indian stereotypes that some consider ‘inappropriate’ and dangerously misleading for mainstream consumption.” (2001: 47) Alexie’s script for the film *Signal Smoke* (1998) generated similar controversial reviews about representations of Native American identities.

Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, however, argue in favor of Alexie’s film that seems to negate stereotypes and affirm real Natives speaking normally: “I felt I was seeing real Native Americans

everyday, talking to each other, living life, without all kinds of filters of history and tradition and archetypes and stereotypes between me and the screen.” (1998: 2) Other critics often speak admirably of Alexie’s “unflinchingly bold depiction of the dysfunctional nature of contemporary reservation life and the fragmented, often alienated ‘bicultural’ lives of characters who daily confront the white civilization that encaptives their world - physically, historically, spiritually, and psychically.” (Evans 2001: 47) He utilizes stereotypes to accentuate the social role of art, which is basically to raise awareness: “Alexie’s purportedly stereotypical drunken Indians achieve and convey for readers vital resonances of realism when he uses them to express the recursive, historical patterns of defeat and exploitation of Indian peoples by white civilization.” (Evans 2001: 48) In the interview with John and Carl Bellante, the interviewers ask him about the risk of running stereotypes: “One of the risks you artfully skirt in your fiction is confirming certain stereotypes – such as the idea Indian can’t hold liquor, or that they have difficulty assimilating into American society.” (1996: 7) Alexie responds by asserting otherwise: “I’m busting those stereotypes too. If you pay close attention to characters in *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto*, most of them don’t drink.” (1996: 7) Alexie in fact only uses stereotypes in order to subvert the readers’ expectations. It is an intellectual invitation rather than, as some critics wrongly assume, a way to popularize his work.

Deconstructing the stereotype of Native American women is also an overriding concern in Alexie’s mind and works. Again in the interview with John and Carl Bellante, he accuses the white culture to be brutally patriarchal. The interviewers then responded by asking: “Then you don’t perceive Indian societies as being patriarchal?” (1996: 10) Alexie’s answer comes as a surprise to the listeners: “Now they are. [Laughter] There used to be a sense of matriarchal power. That’s not the case anymore. Not in my tribe anyway. We’ve resisted assimilation in many ways, but I know we’ve assimilated into sexism and misogyny.” (1996: 10) In another interview, by Dennis West and Joan M. West, Alexie further explain the importance of the role and position of women in Native society and culture:

Well, I’m reminded of this quote from Gabriel Garcia Marquez that my wife has up on the refrigerator. He says something like, ‘Men have been running the world for how many thousands of years, and look what we’ve done. It’s about time we let women take over.’ So that theme is in my head, the idea that in Indian cultures in particular, men have lost all their traditional roles within society. (Berglund 2010: 30)

The importance of the role of women has a domineering presence in Sherman Alexie's collections of short stories. The next chapter is set to introduce one of the approaches that can be utilized to explore stereotypical representations of Native American women, which is, namely, internalization.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Internalization and Stereotyping

#### 2.1. Internalization

According to Wallis and Poulton, in their book entitled *Internalization: The Origins and Construction of Internal Reality*, internalization is a process which explains "how external events shape our inner experience and how [...] the 'outer' world is perceived and integrated." (2001: 1) Burness Moore and Bernard Fine also define internalization as the "process by which aspects of the outer world and interactions with it are taken into the organism and represented in its internal structure." (1990: 102-103) Similarly, Walrond-Skinner views internalization as a "process whereby the individual transfers a relationship with an external object onto his internal world." (1986: 186) Thus, internalization refers to processes that "lead to the psychological contents of significant others being brought inside one's mind and, to a greater and lesser degree, made part of it." (Akhtar 2009: 150) Broadly speaking, internalization is the complex absorbing mechanism that seeks to re-establish identity with an external attribute, image, character or object.

Furthermore, in his book, *Aspects of Internalization*, Roy Schafer argues that the process of internalization in the light of an imagined apparatus is triggered by a specific environment: "Internalization refers to all those processes by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his environment, and real or imagined characteristics of his environment, into inner regulations and characteristics." (1968: 9) Schafer's conception of internalization focuses on the subject in terms of the following activities as specified by Wallis and Poulton: "(1) it is the subject who does the work of transformation or replacement, though possibly in response to environmental pressure; (2) environmental influence or pressure may be in whole or in part imagined by the subject; and (3) not everything internalized has the objective character of being a 'regulation'" (2001: 6) This interaction between the environment and the subject also has consequences on the ego:

Internalization, then, is any process of transformation by which external relationships, object representations, and forms of regulations become part of the inner psychic structure

and this part of the 'inner world' By this concept of integration, we refer to the movement of structural elements, derived from sources in reality, in the direction of integration with that part of the psychic structure which is seen as central to inner identity – the ego. (Meissner 1981: 10)

Internalization is viewed to have three main mechanisms: “incorporation, introjection and identification mechanisms that create permanent internal mental representations out of objects and events.” (Wallis and Poulton 2001: 6)

Critics generally agree that incorporation is related to fantasizing an act of merging with another object or entity (Rycroft 1968, Schafer 1976, Walrond-Skinner 1986 and Wallis and Poulton 2001). Incorporation “refers only to fantasized ingestion and not to assimilation of an object into previously existing structures.” (Wallis and Poulton 2001: 8) Similarly, Walrond-Skinner views incorporation as part of a “phantasy”: “The object is introduced into the body in phantasy becoming part of an internal world of objects. The individual can then act in relation to the internal object – possess it, destroy it, and/or identify with it.” (1986: 179) Meissner observes that incorporation is “analogous to the physical process of ingestion,” which is a process “in which the object loses its distinction as object and becomes totally taken into the inner subject world.” (1981: 287) According to Salman Akhtar, in his *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, incorporation, as one of the mechanisms of Internalization, means “bringing objects from the external world inside oneself in order to achieve mastery over them, make them a part of oneself, and thus destroy them.” (2009: 150) Thus, incorporation provides a way to make a fetish of an object or an entity and develop a desire to absorb or even destroy them through assimilation.

Introjection, on the other hand, provides a perspective towards externality. Schafer views introjection as an

inner presence with which one feels in a continuous or intermittent dynamic relationship. The subject conceives of this presence as a person, a physical or psychological part of a person (e.g., a breast, a voice, a look, an affect), or a person-like thing or creature. He experiences it as existing within the confines of his body or mind or both. (1968: 72)

In other words, the introject is “subjectively conditioned and experienced as existing within the mind or body but apart from the subjective self.” (Wallis and Poulton 2001: 10) Moore and Fine as well as Rycroft agree that the process of introjection is very similar to secondary identification in

which “one imagines another to be inside and part of oneself.” (Wallis and Poulton 2001: 11) <sup>1</sup> In their book, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok draw attention to the importance of considering the original meaning of introjection, which is essentially “(intro-jection: casting inside),” as suggested by Sandor Ferenczi: “Ever since Sandor Ferenczi introduced the concept in 1909 – first Freud and then Karl Abraham took it up, handling it down to many variation in meaning.” (1994: 110) The authors argue that later scholars mystified the term: “Only when its initial and precise meaning is restored will the concept of ‘introjection’ reveal its effectiveness.” (1994: 111) Characteristically, the host is for the most part, conscious of the introject’s presence inside his or her body or mind, whereas identification is largely unconscious.

According to Akhtar, identification is

a process which brings into the psyche less concrete and more role-oriented aspects of significant others in relationship to oneself. Identifications, unlike introjects, do not feel like a ‘foreign body’ in the self and are more likely to be ego-syntonic and in harmony with the individual’s self-image. (2009: 150)

Arnold H. Modell similarly argues that identification is the “representation of an eternal object that has been taken into the ego to form a permanent element within the total personality.” (145) This process is largely “unconscious” (Wallis and Poulton 2001: 13), and Chessick elaborates on the unconscious process of identification whereby “an individual becomes like another person in one or several aspects.” (1968: 165)

However, given the overlapping nature of the three mechanisms of internalization and in order to focus on the analysis of character in terms of internalized stereotypes and the societal forces at play, the above mentioned Schafer’s conception of internalization is perhaps the most appropriate approach to better examine the formation of identity. This study will mainly adopt Schafer’s point of view since it emphasizes the subject in relation to replacement and acknowledges the environmental pressures, imagined or real, that enforce internalized stereotypes. The only required adjustment is to stress this process is largely unconscious in nature as the latter group of critics suggest.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Akhtar, introjection is a “term introduced by Sandor Ferenczi (1909) for a process opposite to projection ... later ... this term had lesser somatic foundations and involved taking the whole or part object in ... However ... remained unassimilated into the total self image” (150).

## 2.2. Stereotypes and Native American Literature:

Stereotypes, on the other hand, are excessive mentally constructed images that people generate when they judge other people based on race or culture. The issue of race in Native Americans' history is overriding and encompasses their own sense of identity. Bruce A. Goebel is one of the critics that examine the importance of race when studying Native American literature. He points out that historically speaking

[...] the term race has referred to two interwoven concepts – the physical appearance and genetics (revealed through skin, hair, and eye color; the shape of eyelids, noses, and lips) directly relating to cultural values, beliefs, and behaviours. Grossly stated, if you could identify a person's genetic 'race,' then you could also construct a profile of his or her cultural 'race.' (2004: 14)<sup>2</sup>

In his book, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Daniel J. Kevles explains how Davenport biologically classified people as being racially different:

He held that the Poles, the Irish, the Italians, and other national groups were all biologically different races; so, in his lexicon, were the 'Hebrews.' Davenport found the Poles 'independent and self-reliant though clannish'; and the Hebrews 'intermediate between the slovenly Servian and Greeks and the tidy Swedes, Germans and Bohemians' and given to 'theiving' though rarely to 'personal violence.' (1985: 46-47)

Goebel remarks that American racism was initially directed to "denigrate and justify the economic exploitation of European immigrants from Ireland or Italy just as it was used to signify the supposed inferiority of people from Asia, Africa, or Native America." (2004: 14) In this sense, Goebel infers that the idea of "race is synonymous with stereotype, in which individuals are stripped of unique qualities and instead are seen as possessing only the typical qualities of their social group." (2004: 14) He also argues that although race "is an illusion created through language by those who might benefit economically or otherwise from the misconceptions and stereotypes of others [...]" still these very same "misguided notions of race have ensured that racism has been and continues to be a persistent fact of life in the United States." (2004: 15) The attempts to eradicate these misguided notions have been somewhat recent in American academia.

In *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, Kenneth M. Roemer explains how until 1969 there were no specialized university professors in Native American Literature and adds:

---

<sup>2</sup> Goebel cites Charles Davenport, a twentieth century eugenicist, who attempted to define national identity through constructed racial behaviour.

This disciplinary barrier to teaching Native American texts as literature collapsed during the 1970s and the 1980s. Broad social and academic movements – Civil Rights and Ethnic Studies, in particular, but also feminism and Women’s Studies – combined with specific literary events help to explain the change. (2005: 2)

Meanwhile, Roemer recognizes the rapid change that occurred: “From ignored to required, from dry bed to mainstream – the rise of American Indian literature deserves much attention and praise while also inviting some perplexing and even troubling questions.” (2005: 3) The interest in Native American literature prompted scholars to seek its canonization endowing it with its own unique characteristics. Roemer identifies the most distinctive characteristic to be that of “a shared history – attitudes reflecting complex mixtures of post-apocalyptic worldviews, an awareness of the miracle of survival, and a hope that goes beyond survival and endurance to senses of tribal and pan-tribal sovereignty and identity.” (2005: 11) Moreover, the historical approach is prevalent in Native American literature and addresses “people who have already experienced a near extinction, survived, and carry on.” (2005: 11) The historical narrative generates a profound sense of loss which also “contributes to the post-apocalyptic sense.” (Roemer 2005: 12)

Drawing attention to Native American Literature and the attempts to canonize it were not the only milestones on the journey towards recognition. Eric Cheyfitz points out that the transition which happened in the 1980s initiated a departure from the “ethnographic” position in order to accentuate more societal concerns:

Until the 1980s the dominant approach in the field of American Indian literatures was the ethnographic-formal [which] places a strong emphasis on the aesthetic or formal properties of native texts in limited cultural contexts, while deemphasizing or ignoring the social, political, and historical contests in which U.S. American Indian literatures take shape. (2006: 5)

Matthew Herman, in his *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature*, argues that Native American literature is collectively characterized as being a form of resistance which aims at nation-building and yet, although united in aspiration, is distinctively diverse, cosmopolitan and politically oriented. Current Native literature has been viewed differently. It can be a form of resistance, a passive surrender to the pressure of cultural values, or a distinctive and new voice that addresses issues of sovereignty and creation. (2010: 1)

What one may call the post-ethnographic mode implies a commitment to a political cause that may be mostly postcolonial and tribal in nature, which is “marked by an undeniable



preoccupation, and status and how these relate both to individual texts and the concerns they narrate and to sociological inquiries into the practice, production, distribution, and reception of Native American literature.” (Herman 2010: 2) Matthew Herman, therefore, discerns, in contemporary Native American studies, a “literary interest in re-establishing connections across personal, generational, as well as jurisdictional spaces.” (2010: 4) Although William Bevis identifies a “homing-in” attribute in recent Native American writing (1987: 580), Herman argues that recent Native American writing has followed the opposite direction:

[...] what might be called a ‘homing –out’ impulse. Here, ‘home’ can be seen broadening out to encompass new and alternative meanings, new and alternative social and cultural arrangements, and new and alternative modes of dwelling in new and alternative locations. (2010: 4)

Herman suggests that there is a surge of a literature of “reconciliation” that “has less to do with territorial belonging than it does with familial or cultural belongingness [...] and closely related to [...] the decentering of reservation space.” (2010: 4) He further explains how “reconciliation is no longer exclusively tied to a return to tradition in the narrow sense; the methods for reconciling tribal identity and belonging are more open ended.” (2010: 5) However, does this propensity towards reconciliation entail a sense of internalized feelings? Does peace here entails passivity on the part of the Native Americans or is it another form of subtle resistance? How far is the Native American identity affected by this so called movement towards reconciliation?

In her article, “Indigineous Identity: What is it, and Who Really Has It?,” Hilary N. Weaver views cultural identity as being both assimilative and dynamic:

Identity is a combination of self-identification and the perceptions of others ... Cultural identity is not static; rather, it progresses through developmental stages during which an individual has a changing sense of who he or she is, perhaps leading to a rediscovered sense of being Native. (2012: 30)

Weaver draws attention to the notion of how identity is partly influenced by the way it is misconceived by others: “Identity is shaped, in part, by recognition, absence of recognition, or misrecognition by others [...] This misrecognition has oppressed Indigenous people and has imprisoned them within a false ‘Indian’ identity.” (2012: 30) Duane Champagne confirms Weaver’s opinion on the problems of misrecognition: “While few mainstream American citizens are knowledgeable about the histories, cultures, and legal status of American Indian individuals

and communities, they often have formed conceptions from mass media and mythology about American Indians.” (2012: 20)<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, some critics have argued that Native American writers have the responsibility to deconstruct some preconceived notions regarding Native Americans’ misrecognized identity, which entails the assertion of an “authentic” Native American identity that is most of the time defined in negation to the audiences’ expectations, readers or viewers alike.

In her book, *Feminist Readings of Native American Literature: Coming to Voice*, Kathleen M. Donovan discusses how Native American women have also been the subject of misinformation: “Such misinformation usually resulted in portraits of Native women that continued the stereotype of romantic savages in the wilderness or, conversely, of lowly members of the tribal hierarchy, but certainly did not describe someone who could be found tanning herself on a Hawaiian beach.” (1998: 17) Donovan points out that what she names as “non-reservation, urban” Native American literature is a very recent phenomenon, in which the male protagonist unwillingly leaves home, undergoes a great deal of turmoil and goes back to his home to lick his wounds: “The hero, a romantic broken figure of defeat, finds a reconciliation with his roots through the intercession of a tribal elder and the healing power of myth and landscape.” (1998: 18) In effect, Donovan argues that the condition of Native women in urban spaces is equally complicated and the healing process is even more painstaking:

Although they face many of the same problems as their male counterparts – alcoholism, drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, suicide, loss of tradition and identity – they also face problems that are distinctively female-gendered: a loss of power and esteem in formerly matrilineal cultures; the trauma of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse from Native and non-Native men; prostitution; a frequent inability to care for their children, with the subsequent loss of their families to a paternalistic social-welfare system; a high rate of teen-age pregnancy and infant mortality; and, sometimes, an unmistakable, yet usually unexpressed, anger at the perceived passivity of native men. (1998: 18)

Nevertheless, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, if “subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for.” (1992: 6)

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Dale Parker asserts the responsibility of the “Indians” towards the expectations of the audience: “It’s not just that audiences will identify the expressions of Indians as Indian painting, writing, music, and so on, whether they are distinctively Indian or not, but also that what Indians do makes (and hence changes) what Indians are, often in defiance of or obliviousness to what audiences expect” (2003: 3).

Attempts to dismantle, let alone eradicate this stereotypical image, have not been entirely successful: “Although over centuries the image of the Indian as a ‘barbarian’ was replaced with those of the ‘Noble Savage,’ the ‘Vanishing Indian,’ [...] the eighteenth century conception of the ‘savage’ Native American has never altogether lost its grip on white-American imagination.” (Banka 2007: 235) Privileging white Americans as rescuers is still a sign of racial superiority. The image of the white American as a hero by his moral responsibility as a rescuer in the name of justice and against all difficulties is constantly projected: “Contemporary narratives about American Indian adoption are informed by the earlier trope of captivity, while they are often also shaped by the concept of rescue, which arose around adoption as it began to be viewed in sentimental terms beginning in the nineteenth century.” (Callahan 2011: 107)

In his book, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*, Michael Pickering draws attention to the inaccuracy of stereotypical representations: “Stereotypes are usually considered inaccurate because of the way they portray a social group or category as homogeneous. Certain forms of behaviour, disposition or propensity are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category.” (Pickering 2001: 4) He explains that the function of stereotypes is to create an illusion of normality: “The imprecise representations involved in this process of social dissemination create the illusion of precision, of order, of the ways things should be.” (Pickering 2001: 4) In effect, those who get stereotyped are trapped in an already framed rhetoric in which “they are then fixed into a marginalized position or subordinate status and judged accordingly, regardless of the inaccuracies that are involved in the stereotypical description given of them.” (Pickering 2001: 5) Inevitably, they will feel under pressure to conform inertly to these normalizing forces that desire power and dictate absolute avowal: “Stereotyping [...] attempts to establish an attributed characteristic as natural and given in ways inseparable from the relations of power and domination through which it operates.” (Pickering 2001: 5) Stereotyping is, therefore, a politically-oriented strategy, one that functions as “a form of social control.” (Pickering 2001: 5) under which the subject becomes basically susceptible and vulnerable. Those characteristics and attributes become so prevalent and widespread that they develop into part of the constitutive nature of a particular group whose members internalize them in order to be accepted by mainstream society. The Native American dilemma of asserting identity is largely affected by this entrapping stereotypical form of discourse.

According to Scott B. Vickers, in his *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature*, two distinctive categories constitute a Native American

stereotype, namely: “one ‘positive’ (that of the Noble Savage) and one ‘negative’ (that of the Ignoble Savage).” (1998: 4) However they both insinuate that the Other is a “racial inferior” construct. Vickers associates the “positive” stereotype with certain characteristics such as:

[...] glamorized as the Noble Savage, representing a lost or vanished human species deemed worthy of emulation or sustained nostalgia [...] child-like race in need of paternalistic guidance, self-improvement, education, civilization [...] permanently consigned to an idealized past, frozen in history as an artefact who can be appreciated philosophically and aesthetically [...] seen as a good example to his/her people, having been converted and/or civilized by the dominant culture [...] considered to be subservient yet honourable character. (1998: 4)

Vickers asserts that these characteristics ascribed to native men or women have been “combined to produce characters of varying degrees of acceptability to the dominant culture.” (1998: 4) On the other hand, the ‘negative’ stereotype is essentially characterized by the act of lacking. The “racial inferior” lacks

A recognizable psychological reality, that is, has no motivation for his or her actions, emotional content, coherent thought processes and speech, personality, bodily self-awareness [...] humor [...] only negative connotation, that is, as ‘murderous,’ ‘rapacious,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘one-dimensional,’ ‘naked,’ ‘heathenish,’ ‘wooden,’ ‘full of gibberish,’ or ‘devilish’ [...] [it] is portrayed as ‘less than human,’ animalistic, and lacking any conscious or moral motivation [...] has skin color or racial features that are exaggerated, caricatured [...] to deny him or her human status ... has no historical or cultural reality [...] and/or is [...] a ‘child of the devil’ and a hostile Other. (1998: 5)

It should be noted that “the use of any stereotype in the portrayal of Indians is considered here to be contributory to their dehumanization and deracination.” (Vickers 1998: 5) Furthermore, Vickers asserts:

the image of the Noble Savage is, like that of the Ignoble Savage, based purely on the moral and ethical foundations of Anglo, European, and Euramerican cultures and, as a romantic construct, portrays the Indian as outside of history and in the realm of mythology, making it easy for whites to project this image, along with that of Christian goodness, onto the Indian as a sign of complicity in the saga of colonization. (1998: 41)

The aim of this study is to explore in what ways and for what end Sherman Alexie, being a Native American himself, uses stereotypical attributes in his short stories collections. In examining Alexie’s short stories, these manifestations, whether positive or negative, will be discussed in

terms of internalized attributes that female Native American characters tend to demonstrate or even probably negate. Roemer observes that Sherman Alexie's literary work addresses this historical dimension:

In "A Good Story" Alexie offers an internationally understated and ironically humorous observation on the post apocalyptic worldview when the mother of one of his narrators, Junior, comments: 'You know,' [...] 'Those stories you tell, they're kind of sad, enit?' Reflecting the responses of many non-Indian and Indian readers to Native American literature, she justifies her request for a 'good story' by adding that 'people should know that good things always happen to Indians, too.' (2005: 12)

The emphasis on survival, which is part of the historical trajectory, continues in so many different forms as that "unflinching awareness of the impact of tragic losses and a persistent articulation, even celebration, of the good stories of survival, including a strong will to defend tribal and cultural sovereignty and identity." (Roemer 2005: 12) Sherman Alexie recognizes this historical perspective in the way he views the Indians-White relationships in terms of the colonized against the colonizer. In an interview with Tomson Highway, Alexie explains the kind of attribute that characterizes the Indian-White relationship: "I think this is the theme between all Indian-White relationships, not only as individuals, but as races, as colonials to colonized [...] It's always going to be an antagonistic relationship between indigenous peoples and the colonial people." (Peterson 1996: 27) The reference to two different peoples is also indicative of different identity formations that are in Alexie's mind often quite antithetical as they belong to different communal senses of identity.

Thus Sherman Alexie's short stories underscore the impact of urban society in the formation of Native identity. However, for Alexie, the landscape of the conflict has moved from being that of margin to center, with Indians living in the margins and white Americans in the centre. It moved from having American Indians living in the desert and white Americans in the cities to that of American Indians living in city spaces in different forms and ways, which is again mainly against the audiences' expectations. Nevertheless, the relation of the colonized to the colonizer continues largely uninterrupted.

This image or framed identity of the foreigner is characterized by being out of urban borders because the Native Americans are represented as uncivilized and savage. Therefore, Native Americans fall outside the realm of urban society and progress. In this context, it has been the task of Native American literature to negate these dominant stereotypes:

Ever since ethnic American literature gained deserved recognition in the mid 70s, one of the priorities of Native American writers has been to debunk white made ethnic stereotypes, such as for instance the stereotype of the ‘savage’ Indian, that is, the opposite of the civilized white Euro-American. (Banka 2007: 235)

Hollywood movies did a notorious job in introducing these stereotypes of Indians who are associated with the image of the savage living in the desert who is always the enemy of the urban sphere.

In sharp contrast, Sherman Alexie introduces Indians who live in the urban sphere: “There is a clear progression throughout the body of Alexie’s work toward a more centralized focus on the issues of urban Indians who are struggling to find their place in the contemporary world, while still preserving the cultural heritage that they hold dear.” (Korsmo 2011: 2) In this sense, Alexie’s work can be seen in sharp contrast to the stereotypical representation of the identity of Native Americans as outsiders to urban spaces.

In this context, Sherman Alexie finds it necessary to intervene and assert the surviving tradition of Native Americans:

Alexie fits in as many references as he can to show how popular images of Indians are wrong and ridiculous, and he tears down the unquestioned influence of many pop icons such as John Wayne. Alexie’s work attacks American popular culture notions of Indianness denying a mainstream audience the ability to rely on nineteenth-century images of native Americans or any other way they could identify with struggles of his characters. (James 2005: 3)

Using parts of his book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* in the film *Smoke Signals* in 1999, Sherman Alexie’s main goal was “to overturn contemporary stereotypes that still persist in Hollywood and Mainstream culture.” (James 2005: 37) Given the fact that it was written, produced and directed by Indians including all actors, the film “subverts the Western format, makes fun of the overly romantic portrayals of Indians, and critiques other conventions expected in a film about minorities living in the United States.” (James 2005: 37)

Sherman Alexie’s representations of the Native Americans are very hybrid: “Sherman Alexie’s urban Indians exist in world in which they do not belong and must struggle to find a middle ground between the two identities that are constantly in odds with one another, that of their Native heritage and that of the dominant white culture that surrounds them.” (Korsmo 2011: 3) This hybridity is the result of moving into urban spaces: “Although some of Alexie’s characters leave the reservation and enter the urban space [...] the experience of growing up, as Alexie puts it

in the interview, ‘firmly within borders,’ continues to affect the characters’ lives, especially their emotional lives.” (Peterson 1996: 141) This is mostly why that in books such as *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), *Ten Little Indians* (2003), *Flight* (2007), and *War Dances* (2009), Alexie “has turned his attention to the experiences of urban Indian people living in a multiethnic environment in situations where identity and cultural loyalties are questioned because of class standing or romantic and sexual relationships.” (McClinton-Temple and Velie 2007: 9) Herman himself asserts that “within Alexie’s work the notion of border crossing is painfully and unavoidably particular.” (2010: 4) In other words, the notion of border crossing is also his source of authenticity in the sense that he revives “literary interest in re-establishing connections across personal, generational, as well as jurisdictional spaces.” (Herman 2010: 4) Alexie succeeds in breaking one of the stereotypical attributes of the Native American as non-urban dwellers. The issue of stereotyping is therefore instrumental in understanding Alexie’s works in general and short stories in particular.

The following chapter will examine the types of stereotypes that are often associated with Native American women and the way they are accentuated and utilized in three stories in Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). These stories are “The Approximated Size of My Favorite Tumor,” “The Fun House” and “A Drug Called Tradition.” The following chapter also considers three stories from *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), which are “Class,” “Indian Country” and “Dear John Wayne”; and two other from *Ten Little Indians* (2003), namely “Search Engine” and “Do you Know Where I Am?”.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Stereotypical Representations of Native American Women**

According to the online article “Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People”, generalized representations of Native Americans consist in “various forms of romanticization; historical inaccuracies; stereotyping by omission; and simplistic characterizations.” One of the forms of romanticization is the use of the image of the “Indian Princess” who is supposed to be “the Native beauty who is sympathetic enough to the white man’s quest to be lured away from her group to marry into his culture and further his mission to civilize her people” (“Common...”; n.p.). The Princess here is endowed with the keen interest to share the white man’s desire to civilize the world in general and her own tribe in particular.

Nevertheless, in his online article “The Basic Indian Stereotypes,” Native American Joseph Riverwind warns against the many fallacies inherent in stereotypical representations about Native Americans:

The nations of this country have never had a concept of Indian royalty. The Indian princess is strictly a European concept. We do not have kings, queens, or princesses. If someone in your family tells you his or her great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess, please correct the person on that issue. (n.p.)

In this case, Sherman Alexie is a Native American writer that tries to correct stereotypical representations by comically and paradoxically reinforcing them through his humorously delineated characters. His short stories are, therefore, so often imbued with grim realities and dark laughter that subtly question the origins and purposes of racial images about Native Americans.

In “Psychological Implications of Stereotyping American Indians Through the Use of Native-themed Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos,” Steinfeldt, Hagen and Steinfeldt point out other “undesirable attributes” attached to Native Americans, such as “violence, promiscuity, drunkenness” which serve to “dehumanize American Indians and to justify genocidal practices against them.” (2010: 215) This practice is also emphasized by Homi Bhabha who observes how the colonizer’s aim is to dehumanize the colonized people in order to deceptively turn his colonial enterprise into a civilizing mission: “The objective of the colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” (1994: 70) On the other hand, Merskin argues that these stereotypes, whether that of “the Indian Princess,” “Omission,” “Stoicism,” connected to other characteristics such as violence, promiscuity and drunkenness, imply a process of internalization:

These representations not only reinforce dehumanizing and limiting views of the capabilities of Native women to themselves (internalized oppression) and to non-Indians, but also result in ‘structural exclusions and cultural imagining [that] leave[s] minority members vulnerable to a system of violence symbolically and actually.’ (2010: 347)

Merskin points out how these representations “reinforce public impressions of what constitutes female Indian-ness and the place of indigenous women in a simultaneously romanticized and demonized past.” (2010: 347) In this sense, both romanticization and omission are peculiar to the stereotypical representations of Native American women.



Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993)<sup>4</sup> includes twenty-two interrelated stories with recurring characters. This collection of short stories has two pivotal characters: Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. The stories describe the anxieties, dreams, limitations and family obligations of those two young Native-American men who live on the Spokane Indian Reservation. In other words, the collection consists of twenty two short stories about the Spokane reservation in Washington State. The same characters are involved in several tales and the main character Victor, "[...] grows from a small child watching relatives fight during a New Year's Eve party ('Every Little Hurricane') to a dissolute man sitting on his broken-down porch with a friend, watching life pass him by ('The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore')." (Steinberg 1993: 235) The title of the book does indeed comprise two stereotypes that characterize the White and Indian identities, respectively "The Lone Ranger" and "Tonto" which were widely propagated by the media. The other collection is *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000)<sup>5</sup>, which consists of nine short stories that are unconventional and darkly comic about modern day Native Americans. The third collection, *Ten Little Indians* (2003)<sup>6</sup>, is equally sardonic.

These stereotypes of Native Americans are largely attributed to the influence exercised by the hegemonic media and colonial discourses. The result is that the image of the Aboriginal/Native man or woman has become disparaging and deprecating:

Portrayals of Aboriginal people as being primitive, violent and devious, or passive and submissive, have become widespread in movies and TV programs and in literature ranging from books to comic strips. Such depictions have become a comfortable frame of reference for most of us each time there is a question about Aboriginal people, even though very few non-Natives have had the opportunity to meet a Native person in real life. ("Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People")

Furthermore, in her article "The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman," Debra Merskin argues that "Native women are considered to be of the fourth world," which means that they face situations in which the Native American population exists under "institutionalized power" run by "a colonizing, subordinating majority." (2010: 3) Societal mistreatment perpetuates a "negative self-image" of Native women:

---

<sup>4</sup> From hereon all quotations will be from this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> From hereon all quotations will be from this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> From hereon all quotations will be from this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

Contemporary examples of subordination and oppression include disparities in health care, economic and legal inequities, and health consequences of discrimination. For example, American Indian women have lower social and economic status than White women with lower earnings (58 cents on every dollar White men make), less education, more poverty (25%), more than a third (38%) of families headed by a Native woman are in poverty and receive poor quality health care. (Merskin 2010: 3)

Merskin adds that Native American girls are “two to three times more likely to commit suicide” and that “the AIDS case rate in American Indian/Alaska Native women is almost four times the rate for non-Hispanic White women.” (2010: 3)

Merskin also explains how the stereotype of Native Americans is constructed in the white people framework of mind: “Whereas ‘‘Little Black Sambo’’ tales reinforced the construction of racist beliefs about Blacks, songs such as ‘‘Ten Little Indians’’ or ‘‘Cowboy and Indian’’ games similarly framed Indian otherness in the White mind.” (352) In other words, the image of the Native American has been mostly depicted through the eyes of the white man and it has been propagated by the media as common knowledge. The result is that “[...] the essence of the White image of the Indian has been the definition of American Indians in fact and in fancy as a separate and single other. Whether evaluated as noble or ignoble, whether seen as exotic or downgraded, the Indian as image was always alien to White.” (Berkhofer 1979: xv) These racial representations have been so meticulously woven into the fabric of society that they are considered to be real and legitimate.

### **3.1- The Stereotype of the Indian Princess:**

One of the most famous myths about the Native princess in relation to national identity is that of Pocahontas. She transcends reality and fiction by being the paragon of Native American women:

The American Indian princess became an important, nonthreatening symbol of White Americans’ right to be here because she was always willing to sacrifice her happiness, cultural identity, and even her life for the good of the new nation [...] The prevailing view of the princess was that she was gentle, noble, non-threateningly erotic, virtually a White Christian, and yet different, being tied to the native soils of America. (Bird 1999: 72)

Accordingly, the romanticization of the Native American female image, which is nevertheless a racial representation, becomes an intricate part of the white man’s way of thinking, which

Sherman Alexie depicts in his short stories using humor, internalization and psychological conflict, as will be explained later.

The Native American stereotype of the Indian princess has been persistently framed as the female noble savage who is controlled by her instincts. In her article, “Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media,” S. Elizabeth Bird argues that the sexualized representations of Native American men and women serve as a form of colonization: “Native American men and women have become sexualized in relation to the White gaze, which is an important component of colonial domination.” (1999: 61) The act of romanticization is subverted by the introduction of the erotic element that portrays Native American women to be at the mercy of their instinct and who desire to be tamed. Merskin explains that the way Native American women are portrayed are two faces of one coin: “The two most common stereotypes of Indian women are the Indian princess, who conveys natural, wholesome, virginity, and freshness, and the Squaw/drudge, her opposite [...] the ‘failed’ princess, ‘who is lower than a bad White woman.’” (2010: 353) Daniel Francis elaborates on the distinctions between these two fixed images:

Where the princess was beautiful, the squaw was ugly, even deformed. Where the princess was virtuous, the squaw was debased, immoral, a sexual convenience. Where the princess was proud, the squaw lived a squalid life of servile toil, mistreated by her men—and openly available to non-Native men. (1995: 121-122)

Native American women are thus mistakenly viewed to be sexually available and predisposed to have intercourse with anybody without any discretion. This kind of argumentation contributes to reinforce a dehumanizing stereotypical representation, and this promiscuous inclination may lead Native American women to be violently abused and, therefore, rape and violence become self-imposed:

Historically, most Whites assumed that all Indians were inferior—ignorant degraded savages and heathens—and furthermore, that the men, who regarded them as slaves, ‘beasts of burden,’ mistreated the women forced to do all the tedious drudgery while the lazy men ruled over them. Even if the Indian woman was not sexually loose by choice, she was victimized by polygyny, or her sexual favors could be bought, sold, or given away by male relatives. (Merskin 2010: 353)

Sherman Alexie is highly conscious of this conflicting and historical interchange between the white man and the Native American. In an interview with Tomson Highway, Alexie explains the kind of attributes that characterizes the Indian-White relationship: “I think this is the theme

between all Indian-White relationships, not only as individuals, but as races, as colonials to colonized [...] It's always going to be an antagonistic relationship between indigenous peoples and the colonial people." (2009: 27) The title of Alexie's first short stories collection is very revealing of that "all Indian-White" struggle.

In "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor," from the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Jimmy Many Horses describes his wife Norma as both beautiful and unpleasantly available to "non-native men," which complicates the representational image of female Native Americans. In his description of his Norma's demeanor and figure, Jimmy embellishes her with stereotypical representations of the Indian Princess who is quite appealing but appealing only to white men: "She walked out of the bedroom in her favorite ribbon shirt, hair wrapped in her best ties, and wearing a pair of come here boots. You know, the kind with the curled toe that looks like a finger gesturing *Come here, cowboy, come on over here*. But those boots weren't meant for me: I'm an Indian." (155) Jimmy's feelings that even his own wife does not belong entirely to him the way he belongs to her reflects a sense of insecurity associated with the mental presence of the white man. Again Alexie makes his readers uncomfortable about this female stereotypical image of the Indian princess that Norma represents in the way she dresses or at least in the way her husband describes her. The fact that she is described wearing a pair of boots that beckons "*Come here, cowboy, come on over here*" is reminiscent of Daniel Francis's description of the Indian beautiful princess versus the unpleasant squaw: "Where the princess was virtuous, the squaw was debased, immoral, a sexual convenience. Where the princess was proud, the squaw lived a squalid life of servile toil, mistreated by her men—and openly available to non-Native men." (1995: 121-122) Moreover, according to Bird, the image of the female princess is moulded according to the colonial frame of mind: "The maiden or princess is the female counterpart of the noble 'princes' portrayed by the early colonists and artists, although significantly the two images are rarely seen together as part of a representation of an American Indian culture." (1999: 72) In this context, Alexie blurs the stereotypical representations of the princess and the squaw.

The stereotypical representation of the Native American woman as sexually attractive and very appealing is constantly suggested:

'Look it, look it,' he said as Norma walked into the tavern. Norma was over six feet tall. Well, maybe not six feet tall but she was taller than me, taller than everyone in the bar except the basketball players.

‘What tribe you think she is?’ Raymond asked me.

‘Amazon,’ I said. (159)

Again, later on in the story Jimmy comments on her feminine charms: “She was beautiful. She had either gained or lost twenty pounds, one braid hung down a little longer than the other, and she had ironed her shirt until the creases were sharp.” (169) The happy return of the wife, after she left the house because of Jimmy’s cynical attitude towards his sickness, is undermined by news of infidelity:

‘Where’ve you been?’ I asked, though I didn’t really want to know.

‘In Arlee. Lived with a Flathead cousin of mine.’

‘Cousin as in cousin? Or cousin as in I-was-fucking-him-but-don’t-want-to-tell-you-because-you’re-dying?’

She smiled even though she didn’t want to.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘I guess you’d call him more of that second kind of cousin.’ (170)

This act of infidelity equates Norma to that stereotype of the Indian woman as the squaw:

The squaw is the other side of the American Indian woman. She is a drudge who is at the beck and call of her savage husband, produces baby after baby, and has sex endlessly and indiscriminately with both Whites and Indians. This image, like the romanticized princess, had its roots in the very earliest accounts of Native American cultures. (Bird 1999: 73)

Norma internalizes this particular stereotype as a self-inflicted act against the external pressures. Roy Schafer speaks of internalization as a process “by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his environment, and real or imagined characteristics of his environment, into inner regulations and characteristics.” (1968: 9) Norma internalizes the stereotype of the squaw to relieve the pressures of her husband’s death and other injuries inflicted by white society; the patrolman’s attitude was a case in point, which looks at her in a derogatory way. Norma’s act of infidelity acknowledges the environmental pressures that enforce these internalized stereotypes.

These stereotypes continue to be used in *Ten Little Indians* (2003). In the first story of this volume, “The Search Engine,” Corliss Joseph is a Native American, English major student at Washington State University. The narrator’s description of her is nothing short of a stereotypical representation of the perfect, attractive Indian princess:

But her skin was clear and dark brown (like good coffee!), and her long black hair hung down past her waist. And she wore red cowboy boots, and her breasts were large, and she knew about Auden, and she was confident enough to approach strangers, so maybe her

beauty was eccentric, even exotic. And exoticism was hard to find in Pullman, Washington.  
(4).

The sexual attractiveness that Alexie attributes to this character is not without historical implications: “The two most famous Native women portrayed in popular media are Sacagawea and Pocahontas, both of whom are presented as sexualized Indian Princess types.” (Merskin 2010: 355) As R. A. Green (1988) pointed out that “society permitted portrayals to include sexual references (bare and prominent bosoms) for females even when tribal dress and ethnography denied the reality of the reference.” (1988: 593) Alexie seems to allude to the sexualized aspect of the Indian identity as projected in media and literature.

Corliss stumbles upon a book of poetry titled *In the Reservation of My Mind* by a Spokane Indian writer named Harlan Atwater. Fascinated by the poems, she goes on a quest to find the mysterious writer who seems to be untraceable. She finds out that the book has not been checked out of the library even though it had been there since 1972. The issue of stereotype is at the heart of her quest since the first move she makes. When she goes to the librarian to inquire about the book, the question of stereotypes in society in general instantly emerges: “The librarian was a small woman wearing khaki pants and large glasses. Corliss wanted to shout at her: Honey, get yourself some contacts and a pair of leather chaps! Fight your stereotypes!” (7) Corliss herself challenges female representations of Native American identity by being enamoured by the poetry of white men such as Auden and Hopkins and by the very act of reading poetry in general: “What kind of Indian loses her mind over a book of poems? She was that kind of Indian, she was exactly that kind of Indian, and it was the only kind of Indian she knew how to be.” (9)

The emphasis on stereotypes in the story continues as Corliss explains why she does not share her apartment with another Native American college student:

She did not want to live with another Indian because she understood Indians all too well. If she took an Indian roommate, Corliss knew she’d soon be taking in the roommate’s cousin, little brother, half uncle [...] and none of them would contribute anything toward the rent other than wispy apologies. (10)

She even speaks of how Native Americans have internalized their stereotypes and accepted hardships and mistreatment as part of who they are and what sheer reality dictates: “Over the last two centuries, Indians had learned how to stand in lines for food, love, hope, sex, and dreams but they didn’t know how to step away. They were good at line-standing and didn’t know if they’d be

good at anything else.” (10) Once again, Corliss rejects this passive submission to internalizing reality and argues that Native Americans take part of the blame:

But Indians made themselves easy targets for bureaucratic skull-crushing. They’d rather die standing together in long lines than wandering alone in the wilderness. Indians were terrified of being lonely, of being exiled, but Corliss had always dreamed of solitude [...] Maybe she lived in an academic gulag, but she’s chosen to live that way. (10)

Her act of fond isolation is one way of rejecting the idea of internalized submission that she describes to be characteristic of Native American current lifestyle.

Although she respected and loved her family, she was uneasy about the way they submissively led their lives and internalized the things they were told to do and the jobs they can acquire:

She loved her fathers and uncle. She loved how they filled a room with their laughter and rank male bodies [...] but she hated their individual fears and collective lack of ambitions. They all worked blue-collar construction jobs [...] because some teacher or guidance counselor once told them all they could work only blue-collar jobs. (13)

It is actually this framed discourse around Native American education and lifestyle that Corliss wants to escape by deconstructing and questioning what other Native Americans take for granted:

How can you live a special life without constantly interrogating it? How can you live a good life without good poetry? She knew her family feared poetry, but they didn’t fear it because they are Indians. The fear of poetry was multicultural and timeless. So maybe she loved poetry precisely because so many people feared it. Maybe she wanted to frighten people with the size of her poetic love. (13)

Again, Corliss’s desire to break away from the norm, from what people perceived to be socially acceptable is a sign of resistance to a normalized process of internalization caused by social pressures.

When Corliss goes home, her father and uncles tease her about reading the poetry of white men:

Because she was Indian, she’d been taught to fear and hate white people. Sure, she hated all sorts of white people – the arrogant white businessmen in their wool suits, the illiterate white cheerleaders in their convertibles [...] but she knew they represented the worse of whiteness. (13)

In other words, it was easy for Corliss to internalize that “fear and hate” towards white people but “what about white compassion and white genius and white poetry?” (13)

In this context, Alexie's "Search Engine" is a narrative that seeks through its main character to dismantle stereotypes and reconstruct identity. It presents a character whose mentality is neither Indian nor white and who is conscious of the process of internalization that her people have suffered. Corliss is an intellectual who is caught between two worlds:

How could she tell her family that she didn't belong with them, that she was destined for something larger, that she believed she was supposed to be eccentric and powerful and great and all alone in the world? How could she tell her Indian family she sometimes felt like a white Jesuit priest? Who could ever believe such a thing? (15)

However, her family holds a very high opinion of her to the extent that she is regarded to be their future savior. In other words, and in this case, the Native American woman is romanticized by her own tribe and not by white men:

Yeah, Corliss," the second uncle said. "You're pretty and smart, why are you wasting your time with poems? You should be studying science and math and law and politics. You're going to be rich and famous. You're going to be the toughest Indian woman around." [...] "And I'll tell you what," her father said. "After Corliss graduates from college and get her law degree, she's going to move back to the reservation and fix what's wrong. We men have had our chances [...] I'll tell you what. My daughter is going to save our tribe." (15-16)

The notion that someone will save the Native Americans from their state of supposed idleness and revive their culture is another process of internalization that the current depressing circumstances dictated.

Corliss's mother is set as her foil in the sense that the mother is depicted to be the emotional parent of a very intellectual and rational daughter. Corliss explains how often her mother becomes "emotional and tell her how proud the family was of her accomplishments." (18) On one occasion her mother acknowledges that Corliss was "the first person from our family to ever go to college." (18) Corliss, however, knows that she did fight her stereotype. She did repudiate the fallacy that a Native Indian woman is a sexualized image of either a stoic or an overemotional, ever giving, romanticized princess:

She knew. She wasn't supposed to be in college and she wasn't supposed to be as smart and she wasn't supposed to read the books she read and she wasn't supposed to say the things she said. She was too young and too female and too Indian to be that smart. But I exist, she shouted to the world, and my very existence disproves what my conquerors



believe about this world and me, but since my conquerors cannot be contradicted, I must not exist. (41)

In the “Search Engine,” Corliss seeks to internalize the identity of a Spokane lover of literature, Harlan Atwater, who is a literature reader who frantically yearns for writing that mirrors her specific interests and culture, that is “someone with whom she can identify [...] She is intrigued by his claimed tribal affiliation – Spokane, like her own – and is hopeful that she has finally found a fellow writer and lover of literature who shares a similar background.” (Berglund 2010: 251) Corliss is attracted to the identity of the poet and feels that they have done so many similar things, which suggests the shape of the doppelganger that is largely based on wishful thinking:

Corliss had swum the Little Spokane River. She’d floated down the river in a makeshift raft. She’d drifted beneath bridges and the limbs of trees. She’s been in the same places where Harlan Atwater had been, and that made her sad and happy. She felt connected to him and wanted to know more about him. (17)

Jeff Berglund argues that Corliss’s urge towards identification, which is one of the forms of internalization, is driven by the power of stereotypes:

Corliss’s pursuit of authenticity will meet with the typical pitfalls created by stereotypical thinking. The story is thus a meditation on reader desires, needs, hope, and expectations as well as writers’ inextricable entanglement in the web of cultural pressures that may include commercial success or some form of cultural capital. (Berglund 2010: 252)

Internalization here materializes in the act of romanticizing Atwater, the fantasy of the Spokane literature lover that Corliss envisions to break away from the stereotype of Native Americans being indifferent to poetry and to the poetry of white men: “Ironically, Corliss also is the victim of romanticism in this story.” (Berglund 2010: 253-254)

Stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans as forms of romanticization are accentuated in how Corliss disdains the way white people romanticize Indians: “White people, no matter how smart, were too romantic about Indians. White people looked at the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the full moon, newborn babies, and Indians with the same goofy sentimentalism.” (11) Corliss admits though that she has taken advantage of this act of romanticizing Native Americans by consciously internalizing the stereotype:

Being a smart Indian, Corliss had always taken advantage of this romanticism [...] If white folks assumed she was serene and spiritual and wise simply because she was an Indian, and thought she was special based on those mistaken assumptions, then Corliss saw no reason to contradict them [...] So if George W. Bush, a man who possessed no remarkable

distinctions other than being the son of a former U.S. president, could also become president, then Corliss figured she could certainly benefit from positive ethnic stereotypes and not feel any guilt about it. (11)

The smart Native American woman who can capitalize of static representations is an image that Alexie uses to deconstruct stereotypes. Alexie's "Search Engine" is a search for identity and common human purpose in contemporary American society that ends in disappointment: "When Corliss finally tracks down the first published Spokane author, she is disappointed to find not only a man who was coerced to play Indian in the late 1960s but also one who has no interest or connection to his tribal people." (Berglund 2010: 254) Corliss is ambivalent about how she views her identity as her love of poetry seems to distance her from her tribal ties. However, finding Harlan Atwater's *In the Reservation of My Mind* is evidence that Native Spokane people love poetry too, which negates the earlier assumption that she constructed about Native Americans and poetry. In a world of misconceptions, labels and assumptions, what seems is not always what is real.

In another story from *Ten Little Indians*, titled "Do you Know Where I Am?", David, the narrator, meets and falls in love with Sharon who is another Native American. They meet each other in their freshman year at a Catholic college in Seattle. They are introduced as the only Native American Catholics for miles around: "we were the only confirmed Native American Roman Catholics within a three-mile radius of campus." (150) The pressures of living in a city of main white population is restated but with a reference to the stereotypical image associated with the Indian princess: "Sharon and I were Native American royalty, the aboriginal prince and princess of western Washington." (151) The two get married, have four children and live happily in Seattle. After ten years of marriage, Sharon confesses to David that she has had an affair. She tells him that he can ask her three questions about the affair and then will not discuss it anymore: "'I don't love him,' she said. 'It's over now. I only slept with him three times. To be fair, you can ask me three questions about it, and I'll answer them as honestly as possible, and then I don't ever want to talk about it again.'" (159) The stoic traits are also accentuated here with her resolve to "deal-making" talk.

The significance of this affair is that David discovers that she has slept with a white man: "'His name is Michael Joyce,' she said. 'He's a regular at the shop. I've asked him to never come back. He agreed. He's a good man.'" (161) M. E. Marubbio speaks of the representation of female

Indians as being “complicated through her gender and sexuality. Her gender makes her a target for rape, while her death ensures the end of a generation.” (2006: 4)

The extramarital affair can, therefore, be seen as a continuation of that stereotypical representation of the female Indian squaw figure; an image that feeds “on the Native woman’s supposed promiscuity and suggest the ramifications of sexual aggression and savageness.” (Marubbio 2006: 12) The husband misleadingly takes comfort that the intruder was not Indian:

‘He’s white,’ she said, volunteering the information, and I was strangely relieved. My emotions were changing and shifting randomly [...] Can you believe I was happy to hear she’d slept with only a white man? I would have been tortured to hear she’d slept with another Indian man. Considering her beauty, ambition, and intelligence, I could conceive of an amazing white man or black man who might love her and be loved in return, but I doubted another Indian man of my particular talents existed out there in the world. Call it a potent mix of arrogance and self-hatred, but I was certain I was the one Indian man who was good enough for my Indian wife. (162)

The important factor here is that what disturbs their marriage is the introduction of a white man whose presence threatens to end their marriage: “With this adulterous act, Alexie also reserves stereotypical gender roles, with the faithful man being stung by his wife’s infidelity. That race matters immensely to David becomes clear in his exuberance that Sharon slept with a white man rather than an Indian man.” (Grassian 2005: 186) Alexie’s message here is that it is the presence of the white man in the Indian society that shall always threaten its integrity and it is the white man who will always invade the households of Indians the way he invaded their country at large. The white man as an intruder, as an invader who threatened the continuity of their marriage is a microcosm of what happened in Native American history. The image of the White man as an intruder who will always disturb the Native existence is internalized as an accepted reality that Native Americans are doomed to experience and, therefore, David is relieved to know that his wife’s temporary lover was a white man. In effect, the whole story is not about Native American women living in the presence of the white man but actually in spite of it.

### **3.2- Stereotyping by Omission:**

Another stereotypical representation that applies to Alexie’s portrayal of Native American women is stereotyping by omission. In the online article “Stereotyping Indians by Omission,” Schmidt points out that many “misconceptions may be attributed directly to the media which, despite superficial attempts to be politically correct, continues to perpetuate stereotypes and fails

to recognize our indigenous population as a part of modern American society.” (“Stereotyping Indians by Omission”: n.p.) The author also stresses that Native Americans are “the only population to be portrayed far more often in historical context than as contemporary people.” (“Stereotyping Indians by Omission”: n.p.) In other words, Native American women exist and yet they have to remain invisible. They exist largely in generic forms that are persistently linked to the past. On the other hand, Native Americans are still depicted through simplistic images: “They are America’s racial Other and alter ego: rejected in order to justify the violent treatment of them as part of progress and civilization, yet also desired for the freedom, land, and innocent state they represent.” (Marubbio 2006: 4) This means, as long as many Native American attitudes and lifestyles are interpreted based on a historical context then any relations to the world as we view it now will be denied. It is a condition in which Native Americans are defined as “a historical race that only exists in past-tense status.” (Steinfeldt, Hagen and Steinfeldt 2010: 213) This process of stereotyping by omission “forces American Indians to remain on the sidelines of the discourse because contemporary American Indians are rendered invisible and replaced by stereotypic representations perpetuated by static societal portrayals of *Indians*.” (Steinfeldt, Hagen and Steinfeldt 2010: 215) The invisible Native American who is thus erased from contemporary societal involvement while remaining only historically significant is another stereotype that Alexie exploits in his depiction of Native American women.

In Alexie’s story, “A Drug Called Tradition” in his collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior, and Victor drive a long distance to Benjamin Lake to try a new drug that would help them experience hallucinatory visions. Victor explains how his grandmother’s ghost reappears and is linked to tradition. The reference here is to the stereotype of Omission in which Native Americans are portrayed in historical context as Schmidt has referred above. The grandmother is portrayed to be literally part of a dead history that exists either in human memory or in history books.

In Alexie’s collection of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), Alexie moves away from the image of the misfit and the unsuccessful Indian into something different: “I also wanted to get away from the model of the dysfunctional Indian.” (*Apud* Cline: 200) In “Dear John Wayne,” Alexie subverts the binary of the potent and authoritative colonizer, who represents civilization and order, and the colonized subject who represents lawlessness. The story is about a fictional interview that takes place in 2052 between the white anthropologist Spencer Cox, who interviews Etta Joseph, a 118-year-old Spokane, who was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation

and now resides in the St. Tekakwitha Retirement Community in Spokane, Washington. Presently, Cox is doing a research on “the effect of classical European ballroom dancing on the indigenous powwow.” (193) Etta negates the traditional image of the passive interviewee and engages in an intellectual and subtle conversation with Cox in which she dismantles the assumed authority of the white interviewer and voices her doubts about the interviewer’s knowledge that is mainly informed by books. She succeeds to re-emerge into Cox’s world in which she hardly existed apart from books and documentaries. The interview retrieved her from historical omission.

When Cox claims to regain his authority as an expert in the field by citing his publications, Etta tells him that these academic books are full of lies and that she has to live her life trapped in this already framed discourse as defined by white men: “Mr. Cox, Spenser. For the last one hundred and eighteen years, I have lived in your world, your white world. In order to survive, to thrive, I have to be white for fifty-seven minutes of every hours.” (194) Etta’s statement is a clear articulation of internalized identity. The fact that she has to “be white” is an indication of her effort to assimilate into the white culture which implies an act of subjugation and withdrawal. In response to Cox’s question about the other three minutes, she explains that gap in time in terms of resistance: “That, sir, is when I get to be Indian, and you have no idea, no concept, no possible way of knowing what happens in those three minutes.” (194) Etta persistently asserts her constant endeavour to decolonize herself from the hegemonic grip of white man: “Those three minutes belong to us. They are very secret. You’ve colonized Indian land but I am not about to let you colonize my heart and mind.” (194)

Wittingly, Etta controls the interview and subverts Cox’s plan of asking Etta about the powwow dance as she tells the story about her love affair with John Wayne, and in effect she purposely pukes fun at his assumed knowledge of Native cultures: “If John Wayne is the macho monument to everything patriarchal, sexist, homophobic, and delusional about American power and self-proclaimed manifest destiny, Alexie’s innovative fantasy shatters his ideological clay feet.” (Moore 2005: 305) In other words, John Wayne is targeted in this story because he is the ultimate American icon: “To be certain, there are few American icons as quintessentially masculine and American as John Wayne. At the same time, Wayne is often best known for playing rugged cowboys who are portrayed as heroes opposite to villainous ‘savages’ Indians whom he often battles.” (Grassian 2005: 160) Not only does Etta assert her own existence and knowledge but also her own place in Wayne’s world and the history that the likes of Wayne distorted.

Etta tells Cox that she used to be an actress and recalls her affair with John Wayne on the set of the famous Western movie, *The Searchers*. The purpose of this recollection is, for Alexie, to question gender roles and general assumption about racial and national history:

The fact of intimacy between these two improbable lovers underscores humane interrelationship – and its lack – across race and gender. Human closeness prevails against the strong-man Hollywood stereotype by narration of his and her self-doubts, insecurities, needs, naivetes, contradictions, open hopes – various levels of psychological as well as sexual intimacy. (Moore 2005: 307)

The failed masculinity that Etta attributes to John Wayne, in the way she describes him as extremely feminine and like to be called by his real first name Marion, strips him from his grandeur and gives Etta the upper hand:

His hands were shaking, making it nearly impossible for him to properly fit the condom, so Etta Joseph reached down, smoothed the rubber with the palm of her left hand – she was reaching John Wayne – and then guided him inside her. He made love carefully, with an unintentional tantric rhythm. (196)

Alexie here deconstructs the stereotypical male identity and introduces Etta who is a representation of the Native American woman who is able to negate internalization by defying the hegemonic masculine image that both Wayne and Cox represent in the story.

Another story in the same collection is “Indian Country” and it is also a continuation of the uncertainty of masculine dominance and the assertion of Native American women identity. Low Man Smith is a Coeur d’ Alene Indian; a mystery writer with a white mother. His friend Tracy is a white lesbian. She is now in an affair with a Native American woman, Sara Polatkin, who wants to break away from any hegemonic domination. The introduction of the Lesbian Native American can be seen as one way to restore the image of the Native American woman from a receding history. It is an attempt to pull the static image of the Native American woman from a tradition of Omission that belongs to the museum into the modern world of queerness, gender issues and complex identities. In response to Low Man’s question why Sara has become more into women when prior to that shift she was heterosexual, she retorts by saying: “I’m running away from the things of men.” (139) This encounter is, therefore, another affirmation of resistance on the part of Native American women to any societal force that may paint them with a particular brush: “To a large extent, this is also Alexie’s purpose in the collection: to criticize codes of male behaviour and what he perceives to be the hegemonic patriarchal system of Indian and mainstream American

male culture.” (Grassian 2005: 158) However traces of white mainstream influence continue to be accentuated as Sara’s father, Sid, accuses Tracy of turning his daughter into a lesbian:

‘I raised my daughter better than this,’ said Sid.

‘Better than what?’ asked Low.

‘My daughter wasn’t, wasn’t gay until she met this, this white woman.’ (146)

Tracy herself is aware of that influence when she explains why she is nervous about meeting Sara’s parents: “I’m freaking out her parents. Completely. Not only am I a lesbian but I’m also white.” (137) The internalization of the white lesbian identity by the Native American Sara remains one of the most controversial questions in the whole collection.

In another story in the same collection titled “Class,” the protagonist Edgar, a Native American lawyer, internalizes his status in society as an inferior human being in a white society; an example of “his willful deception is the fact that he uses a phony Indian last name, ‘Eagle Runner,’ rather than his real last name, “Joseph,’ because of its perceived romanticism.” (Grassian 2005: 163) Again the representational stereotype of romanticism emerges and yet with a different twist. There is the tendency here to internalize stereotyping by Omission that is to reinforce the notion of the invisible Native American. This character attribute, Edgar explains, was the result of his Native mother’s influence:

Velma, my dark-skinned mother, was overjoyed by my choice of mate. She’d always wanted me to marry a white woman and beget half-breed children who would marry white people who would beget quarter-bloods, and so on and so on, until simple mathematics killed the Indian in us. When asked, my mother told white people she was Spanish, not Mexican, not Hispanic, not Chicana, and certainly not Spokane Indian with a little bit of Aztec thrown in for spice, even though she was all of these things. (40)

The Native American mother obviously internalizes the mainstream conception of the inferiority of the Native American race and strives to blend in and survive the hegemonic domination of the white superiority. The mechanism of stereotyping by omission is internalized and becomes self-inflicted in this particular story.

In Alexie’s collection *Ten Little Indians* (2003), the Native American narrator, in the short story “What You Pawn I Will Redeem”, sets from the very beginning his story in light of his desire to hide his narrative, and therefore his collective tradition, which is a sardonic attempt to reinforce stereotyping by Omission: “One day you have a home and the next you don’t, but I’m not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless, because its’ my secret story, and

Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks.” (169) The act of hiding Native secrets becomes a motif that subtly criticizes the colonial pretensions of preserving the Native American tradition. The narrator of the story, Jackson, is a homeless Spokane Indian who lives on the streets of Seattle: “Probably none of this interests you. I probably don’t interest you much. Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We’re common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with may be a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage.” (170) The author deliberately reinforces stereotypes:

If you put Junior and me next to each other, he’s the Before Columbus Arrived Indian, and I’m the After Columbus Arrived Indian. I am living proof of the horrible damage that colonialism has done to us Skins. But I’m not going to let you know how scared I sometimes get of history and its ways. I’m a strong man, and I know that silence is the best way of dealing with white folks. (171)

The story, therefore, sets itself in negation to the white man’s pretentious attempts to save or keep indigenous population as a part of modern American society.

On their way to the liquor store, Jackson Jackson and his friends Rose of Sharon and Junior stop for a moment at a pawn shop window. Jackson swears that the dance regalia displayed in the window belonged to his grandmother but it was stolen fifty years ago. Allegorically, the regalia represents the Native American tradition, which is now merely on display for people interested in antiques. Jackson goes inside with his friends to see if he can really identify the regalia and prove that it belongs to his grandmother: “So Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I walked into the pawnshop and greeted the old white man working behind the counter.” (172) Jackson knows that each Indian family has its own secret way of marking regalia, an expression of resilience against forces of Omission which is historically significant. He says that there is a yellow bead somewhere on the regalia and Jackson successfully finds it there on this particular regalia. In response to the request of giving back the regalia, the white pawnbroker said: “That would be the right thing to do [...] But I can’t afford to do the right thing. I paid a thousand dollars for this. I can’t give away a thousand dollars.” (172) In this context, the author ridicules the white man’s attempt to preserve that tradition by giving it back to its real inheritors: “All right, Jackson, Jackson [...] I’d sell it to you for nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars. I’d lose a dollar. It would be the moral thing to so in this case.” (173) Here again, we are introduced to a white man who is the owner of the pawn store and although Jackson was able to prove that the regalia actually belonged to his grandmother, the white owner made fun of him by telling him and his friends that the price for the regalia is \$1,000,



but the white pawnbroker says he will sell it to him for \$999 if Jackson comes back with the money within twenty-four hours.

The white man, who significantly in the story owns the Native American tradition that the regalia represents, makes the rules and dictates the present. Despite the representational reading of the presence of the white man in the lives and tradition of American Indians, the story invites another reading as it comes to its end:

When he [Jackson] comes back to the pawnshop, however, it is the white pawnbroker who selflessly gives him the fancydancing regalia for free [...] This story is a first for Alexie, in which a white man is ultimately the hero of the story suggesting that Alexie's perspective towards non-Natives may have softened. (Grassian 2005: 188)

Even white men, Alexie wants to perpetuate in this story, have a redeeming quality. What Alexie achieves at the end of the story is to deconstruct the stereotypes of both the Native American as a person who has internalized defeatism and the white man as the monopoliser. As Jackson takes the regalia and walk outside the store, not only has he figuratively liberated his Native tradition but saved it from sheer oblivion. The act of liberating the dress becomes a reason for jubilation: "I stepped off the sidewalk and into the intersection. Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped. They all watched me dance with my grandmother. I was my grandmother, dancing." (194) What was history becomes contemporary and what has been persistently linked to the past becomes here and now.

### **3.3-The Stereotype of Native Stoicism:**

The third stereotypical representation of American Indians compromises "their stoicism and lack of emotion, conditioned by a century and a half of stern, unsmiling photos, and descriptions of people behaving with programmed ritualism." (Bird 1999: 63) The representation perpetuates an image of the Native as deprived of emotions and as mere ethnographic objects, an image which has been propagated by popular culture:

Kimberley Norris, an American Indian woman who had a small role in the 1980s TV miniseries, *Son of the Morning Star*, reported how she was told to redo a scene in which she wept for the slain leader Crazy Horse. Instead of her tears, she was told, "Let's do it again and just take it with that dignified stoicism of the Indians. (Bird 1999: 144)

Alexie undermines the stereotype of native Stoicism by his excessive and yet witty sense of humour that ultimately debunks the previous statement about the stereotypical attempts to present Native Americans as "stern, unsmiling ... people behaving with Programmed ritualism." (Bird

1999: 63) In his critical discussion of Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Louis Owens argues that many of the depictions of Native American characters too often address images which would be expected by white readers:

[...] his bleakly absurd and aimless Indians are imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing; there is no family or community center toward which his characters [...] might turn for coherence; and in the process of self-destruction the Indians provide Euramerican readers with pleasurable moments of dark humor or the titillation of bloodthirsty savagery. Above all, the non-Indian reader of Alexie's work is allowed to come away with a sense [...] that no one is really to blame but the Indians, no matter how loudly the author shouts his anger. (1998: 61)

What is so distinctive of Alexie's delineation of stereotypes is that they are most often tinged with humour. Alexie is considered to be a controversial writer when it comes to discussing his use of humour:

His detractors characterize his writing as harmful pandering to white expectations, arguing that Alexie not only avoids the moral and social obligation to educate white readers and re-instill cultural pride in Indian readers, but he also works actively against such goals with his humor. To some critics, his playfulness may demonstrate skill as a writer, but it betrays Indian people by presenting them as clichés who deserve to be laughed at. (Coulombe 2001: 116)

However, as Coulombe argues, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie "uses humour – or his characters use humor – to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and foster bonds." (2001: 116) Similarly, his use of humour may have another objective: "Alexie's sophisticated use of humour unsettles conventional ways of thinking and compels re-evaluation and growth, ultimately allowing Indian characters to connect to their heritage in novel ways and forcing non-Native readers to reconsider simplistic generalizations." (Coulombe 2001: 117) On the other hand, employing humour to provoke social awareness "provides an emotional and intellectual meeting ground [...] to reconsider reductive stereotypes and expectations." (Coulombe: 118) In *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, Louis Owens defends Alexie against critics who think that he ignores social and political concerns:

I would argue that self-destructive, self-deprecatory humor provides an essential matrix for this fiction because such humor deflects any "lesson in morality" from the non-Native reader and allows authors to maintain an aggressive posture regarding an essential

“authentic” Indianness while simultaneously giving the commercial market and reader exactly what they want and expect in the form of stereotype and cliché. (1998: 76)

Arguably, Alexie displaces the traditional attribute of stoicism, which is largely a European construct of Native identity, with humour as contemporary potential to encounter social pressures and injustice. One may argue that Alexie’s “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor,” more than any other story in the collection, betrays this “self-deprecatory” trend about stoic “Indianness,” which likewise serves the purpose of explaining the strategy of internalized identity which is peculiar to some of Alexie’s characters.

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), “The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor”, as already mentioned, is a story about a married couple, Jimmy Many Horses and Norma. Jimmy narrates the cause of the fight between him and Norma to a friend who drives him to the nearest tavern where Norma went to dance, after leaving their house in anger. Jimmy’s unpardoned fault is that he delivered the horrible news that he is dying of cancer to Norma, but in the form of a joke; a manner that Norma finds neither funny nor appropriate. In this respect, Jimmy’s humour

[...] appears to be an attempt to transform a very real threat to his life into a benign token of a national past-time. The comic treatment is a coping mechanism that borders on denial. He makes light of a serious danger to his life by connecting it to – and reducing it to - a mere game. His humor seems like an effort to hide from the reality of cancer. (Coulombe 2001: 112)

The character’s internalization of the stereotype of the careless, carefree Indian is “a coping mechanism” that enables him to live through his dilemma. Similarly, some of the characters in this collection of short stories render stereotypical representations that help them survive racial profiling and mistreatment by society.

In contrast to Jimmy Many Horses’ attitude of sheer humour against calamities, one overriding trait that Norma portrays is stoicism, which is considered to be a stereotypical attribute of Native Americans. As she gets extremely upset with Jimmy, Norma storms out and drives to the Powwow Tavern to go dancing without uttering one word. Disturbed by the notion of his wife finding another dance partner, Jimmy seeks his wife at the Powwow Tavern and apologizes for trying to be funny about his cancer. But when he states that he will make one or two more jokes about it, Norma reacted austere: “Norma slapped me in anger, had a look of concern for a moment as she wondered what a slap could do to a person with terminal cancer, and then looked

angry again.” (159) Norma remains stoically against the idea of using the camouflage of humour to deal with a serious matter such as cancer: “If you say anything funny ever again, I’m going to leave you [...] And I’m fucking serious about that.” (159) Norma’s insistent refusal to accept humour as her husband’s way to deal with tragedy depersonalizes her as someone who is devoid of emotions and strictly austere, which is characteristic of stoicism.

When Jimmy reflects on certain moments in their relationship, he remembers the time when they were both harassed by a Washington State patrolman. As the patrolman was falsely accusing them of “reckless driving, resisting arrest, threatening an officer with physical violence,” Norma humorously plays the role of the Native American woman with an internalized racial profile. She playfully tells the patrolman after hearing his alleged accusations and intentions: “If you do [...] I’ll just tell everyone how respectful you were of our Native traditions, how much you understood about the social conditions that lead to the criminal acts of so many Indians. I’ll say you were sympathetic, concerned and intelligent.” (166) The stereotype that Norma plays here, entertainingly though, is that of the Indian woman who feels indebted to the white society despite its incriminating attitude towards the Native Americans. Norma’s stoicism here, in trying initially to avoid any further confrontation with the patrolman, becomes later on infused with sarcasm.

The story ends with a sardonic note despite Norma’s return. After leaving him for months, even when he was at the hospital, Jimmy’s wife returns after she has had an affair, but ended up leaving that other man because he was serious about it, which Alexie implies to be part of her stoic nature: “She turned stoic, gave me that beautiful Tonto face, and said, ‘Because he was so fucking serious about everything.’” (170) Although Jimmy Many Horses admits that knowing about his wife’s infidelity did hurt him even more than his tumors, he joined her in a “full-fledged laughter.” (170)

In one of the interviews, Alexie explains that his aim is not to restore the lost heritage of the Indian tradition as much as try to recover or sustain a personal identity:

I’m not talking about four directions corn pollen mother earth sky shit. I’m not talking about that stereotypical crap about being Indian. There’s always a huge distance between public persona and private person. In my art I try to keep that as narrow as possible. I try to write about the kind of Indian I am, the kind of person I am and not the kind of person or Indian I wish I was. (Torrez 1999: n.p.)

In other words, Alexie pulls the Native identity from a fixated Indian tradition, which is largely a social construct, into a more contemporary terrain in which the individual is still able to belong to a community, a tribal affiliation or a particular race despite his or her idiosyncrasies.

In the same short stories collection, the short story “The Fun House” depicts a woman who is torn between the Indian she is and the Indian she wishes herself and family to become. The narrator’s aunt is portrayed as the woman of the tribe. She laboriously makes a bead dress that is too heavy for any woman to wear, which implies a test of strength: “When a woman comes along who can carry the weight of this dress on her back, then we’ll have found the one who will save us all.” (76) She endures the humorous comments from her husband and her son’s consistent derisions but she is repulsed by their indifference as they never show gratitude for the ways she cares for them each day: “You’re just a couple of ungrateful shits [...] Where would you be if I didn’t cook, if my fry bread didn’t fill your stomachs every damn night?” (77) She indignantly tells her son: “Look at you. Thirty years old and no job except getting drunk. What good are you?” (78) Her understanding of identity is associated with productivity and resilience ties her to the stoic tradition.

In this context, the narrator’s aunt can be seen as a stereotypical depiction of a drudge abused by her family. Sundquist describes the drudge as “Working hard both in the wigwam/lodge etc. and in the fields, often from dawn to dusk.” (*Apud* Merskin 2010: 134) She usually lives “a miserable life, as they are married to tyrants who treat them cruelly and callously,” and are “completely helpless victims of their husbands’ ruthless natures.” (2010: 134) Sundquist asserts that this representational image “can be defined as a person who must work hard and long at unpleasant tasks [...] was treated like a drudge by her man [...] she was expected to work herself almost to death while her husband was lounging about, issuing sharp orders as if to a domestic animal.” (2010: 88) Characterized by tolerance and perseverance against tyrants unpleasant treatment by spouses or any other patriarchal figures renders her very stoic in nature.

Merskin points out the paradoxical nature of this particular stereotypical image: “She often has many children and may survive several husbands. Her appearance can be scary or comical.” (357) Accordingly, the story presents this stereotypical image in a humorous context. On the other hand, the narrator’s aunt never fails to live up to the traits of the good Native American mother. In her description of the traits of the stereotypical image of the good Indian mother, Merskin discerns positive characteristics: “The earth and good mother categories contain the few positive traits of Indian women.” (2010: 357)

Her determination to go swimming and her refusal to come out of the creek reveals not only preference but stoicism. Her affirmative attitude to enforce change rather than just be an inspiring model for others deconstruct the previously constructed stereotype of the tribal Native woman: “While the woman draws upon her inner strength to rise above the skewed ethics of her husband and son, the dance and the bead dress connect her to a traditional Indian culture as well as signal the beginning of a new tradition.” (Coulombe 2001: 127) When she says that the dress is “just like the sward in the stone” it is a reference to leadership and “she proves herself a leader by wearing the dress.” (Coulombe 2001: 127) The aunt in “The Fun House” demonstrates the courage and strength that can be invoked from both past and present experiences. She capitalizes on situations like surviving childbirth and a car accident in the past together with the anxiety of providing for her family, by sewing and cooking, who fail to recognize their responsibilities. She stages rebellion by deciding not to return to the house. In this sense, the aunt refuses to internalize social pressures and decides that she has a fighting chance to unlock herself from being entrapped in this racial or tribal course of events in which she must adhere to the role of the Native mother. She deserves the dress because she exerted effort and seriousness which symbolizes the notion of earning her position in the tribe rather than have it thrust upon her as the stereotype of the good mother implies. The story ends with the stoic assertion that “she knew things were beginning to change.” (82)

A similar stereotype of the stoic tribal Native woman in the collection appears in the second story titled “A Drug Called Tradition.” In this story, as already mentioned, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior, and Victor take a ride to Benjamin Lake to experience a new drug that induces visions. The boys describe the hallucinations in a stream of consciousness fashion. The hallucinations are piecemeal and confusing to the outsider. The boys vehemently speak of how the drug is “Indian” and very spiritual. They have visions of their dead people and can almost experience each others’ dreams. Again Schafer’s definition of internalization as a process “by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his environment, and real or imagined characteristics of his environment, into inner regulations and characteristics.” (1968: 9) is very telling of Victor’s experience, which is induced by drugs. Victor transforms his imagined interactions with the environment into sheer reality as he meets his dead “grandmother walking across the water toward me, I threw away the rest of my drug and hid in the backseat of Junior’s car.” (22) Later on, he notices again his grandmother walking up to the car: “Big Mom was the spiritual leader of the Spokane Tribe. She had so much good medicine I think she may

have been the one who created earth.” (23) Here again the stereotype of the “earth and good mother.” (Merskin 2010: 357) reappears and paradoxically reminding the vulnerable youth of the stoic tradition of self-control. In retrospect, both portrayals of the narrator’s aunt in “The Fun House” and the Big Mom in “A Drug Called Tradition,” in this sense, represent the stereotype of the female Native American who was “permanently consigned to an idealized past, frozen in history as an artifact who can be appreciated philosophically and aesthetically (as a ‘cooper god’ or ‘natural philosopher’) but who has no present political reality.” (Vickers 1998: 4) Thus the historical context continues to be a defining factor in stereotypical representations of Native American women.

### **Conclusion:**

Sherman Alexie said that when he heard the line “I’m in the reservation of my mind” from a poem by Paiute poet Adrian Louis, he knew that he wanted to be a writer:

As an Indian the idea of the reservation is always there. You grow up firmly within borders. As you grow up as an Indian, you know mathematically for certain your ethnicity. I’m 13/16 Indian. Everything is assigned and valued and placed. When I was born, I had a social security number and a tribal identification number [...] Even if they [his characters] can be successful, the idea of borders goes beyond their ethnicity and into their personal decisions, and they limit themselves in other ways. (Nygren 2009: 155)

The notion of identity is, therefore, central to Alexie’s understanding of character formation and a defining factor that largely outlines his literary works in general. The representation of Native American women in his works is a conscious endeavour that falls under the category of identity. In an interview with the brothers John Bellante and Carl Bellante, Alexie presents his views on the importance of the role of women in culture when asked “what about white culture makes [him] so angry”:

Pretty much everything patriarchal. [...] There used to be a sense of matriarchal power [among Indian societies]. That’s not the case anymore. Not in my tribe anyway. We’ve resisted assimilation in many ways, but I know we’ve assimilated into sexism and misogyny. [...] As with anything else, women always have power. Women are the creators. We get into trouble when we try to deny that. So I’m angry toward this patriarchal country that creates an environment totally hostile toward women. (Bellante and Bellante 1996: 15)

In some of Alexie’s short stories, internalization dramatizes the conditions that determine the lives of Native American women. These harsh realities are predicated on problems such as

unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, poverty, violence and hegemonic conditions. Like Alexie's use of dark humour, internalization becomes another tactical approach to point out historical and social conditions of unfairness that are imposed by white hegemony. What Alexie's characters internalize are the absurdities of cultural hegemony, social inequality and the loss of tradition that are projected through stereotypical representations of Native Americans in general and the Native woman in particular. By creating characters that internalize certain stereotypes, Alexie's aim is not to reinforce those static and false representations but rather draw attention to them: "In other words [...] to recognize the way the dominant culture has stereotyped and eroded culturally specific rituals and traditions." (Heldrich 2010: 27) This process of internalizing the harsh conditions in the reservations can be considered an extension and an indication of what Louis Owens calls "doomed Indianness," (O'Shaughnessey 2010: 214) a condition in which the Native American "is supposed to vanish, to die, culturally and literally" (O'Shaughnessey 2010: 214), which also speaks to the stereotyping by Omission.

Alexie's interest in the impact of stereotypes is reflected, for instance, in his portrayals of women in his screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*:

As a film recognized for its decisive break from Hollywood stereotypes, *Smoke Signals* (1998) features Native women in significantly different roles from classic Hollywood portrayals [...] the women in the film act as catalysts for both narrative and character development, furthering not only the movement of the plot but the growth of self-understanding and mutual bonds between the central male characters. (Lawson 2010: 95)

Similarly, the representations of Native American women in some of Alexie's short stories serve as a catalyst to deconstruct or negate stereotypes: "The use of American Indian women by White men was often justified by essentially dehumanizing them—claiming that they were not capable of the same emotions as White women, even to the extent of neglecting their children." (Bird 1999: 73) Alexie seeks to overturn these stereotypical representations by humanizing those characters that is by asserting that, like everybody in this world regardless of race and color, they have their own virtues and vices. Some other women are set to resist this form of internalization, especially in Alexie's second short stories collection. The general representations can be forms of romanticism, generalizations and stereotyping by omission. Particular forms can be that of the princess, the stoic woman, the squaw and the drudge.

The title of his first short stories collection signifies a racial unrest. The Lone Ranger and Tonto are metaphorical images of two popular movie characters. The fistfight in heaven



symbolizes their struggle over power, which sets the stage for the readers to view Native Americans and the Whites as rivals. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, “The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor” is a story about the restless and discontented married couple, Jimmy Many Horses and Norma. Norma’s beauty is described by her in a way that invokes the stereotypical representation of the Native American woman as a princess, such as Bird argues: “This *Pocahontas* is still a White fantasy, and the Disney-led revival of the story has breathed new life into an American Indian princess stereotype that never really disappeared. The image lives on in local legends about maidens, or princesses, who leaped to their deaths for love of a handsome brave or a White man.” (1999: 76) Norma also displays stoic traits that are also stereotypical representations attributed to Native American women. Norma internalizes the stoic stereotypical attribute along with the stereotype of the squaw which she uses to combat her husband’s staunch humor in the face of inevitable death, the way she wittingly utilizes sarcasm with the white Washington State patrolman.

In “The Fun House,” the narrator’s aunt is a Native American who cares for her family and its connections to the tribe. She is portrayed as a woman of strength who makes a bead dress that is too heavy for women to wear and who endures the comical comments from her husband and son. However, she is repulsed by their indifference as they never show appreciation for the ways she cares for them. In this context, the narrator’s aunt can be seen as a stereotypical portrayal of a drudge, a slave-like, working hard woman, abused by her family. Her resolve to go swimming and her refusal to come out of the water reveals her rejection to internalize that servile image any more, which was imposed by both familiar and external forces. In “A Drug Called Tradition,” Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior, and Victor drive to Benjamin Lake to try a new drug that brings on visions. Victor meets his dead grandmother walking on the water and again walking up to his car. Here again the stereotype of the “earth and good mother” reappears and is linked to tradition and the reference here is of course to the stereotype of Omission. The grandmother is portrayed to be literally part of a dead history, which Victor internalizes in the form of a drug.

In the second short stories collection, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), Alexie provides portraits of women who defy the act of internalizing stereotypical representations. In the story “Dear John Wayne,” Etta Joseph, a 118-year-old Spokane woman set in a fictionalized futuristic interview, dismantles the authority of the white professor Spencer Cox and the disparages the masculine reputation of John Wayne. Another portrait of an empowered Native American woman is found in “Indian Country” which provides a continuation of the ambiguity of

masculine domination and the affirmation of Native American women identity as equally powerful if not menacing to that masculine authority with the introduction of a homosexual Native American woman. Low Man Smith introduces Sara Polatkin, a lesbian Native American woman who wants to break away from the world of men. Sara's homosexuality can also be seen as a Native American woman's unconsciously internalized effort to blend in with a white mainstream society since her love partner, Tracy, is a white woman. In another story, "Class," the principal character, Edgar, is a Native American lawyer who internalizes his status in society and considers himself inferior to white society. He explains that his feelings of subordination were pushed by his Native American mother who, in complete and utter submission, wanted to have the Indian element eradicated from her family's genes. The internalization in this case is completely on the conscious level.

In another volume of short stories titled *Ten Little Indians*, the first story of this volume, "The Search Engine," portrays Corliss Joseph, a Native American English major student at Washington State University. Alexie's account of her borders on another stereotypical representation of the ideal, gorgeous Indian princess. Alexie's use of or reference to these stereotypical representations seems to allude to the sexualized feature of the Indian identity as wished-for in media and literature. Corliss even speaks of how Native Americans have internalized their socially imposed typecasts and have agreed to take in deprivation and abuse as a constitutional nature of who they are and what reality is. She rejects this submissive attitude and argues that Native Americans are to be held responsible for this grim reality. In another story from *Ten Little Indians*, "Do you Know Where I Am?", the narrator, David, falls in love with Sharon who is another Native American. The pressures of living in a city of main white population is reaffirmed and a reference to the stereotypical image peculiar to that of the Indian princess is reiterated. After ten years of marriage, Sharon confesses to David that she has had an extramarital affair. The stoic traits are also accentuated as she tells him that he can ask her only three questions about the affair and that will be it. The affair also speaks to the representation of female Indians as being a squaw figure. The disturbing part is that she cheats on her husband with a white man. Sharon internalizes the reality that the presence of the white man as an intruder that will always resurface to disrupt the normal happy life of the Native couples. She internalizes the reality that they are doomed to have this intervention and that she was just fulfilling that grim destiny.

Alexie presents these Native American women characters that either internalize or negate the social pressures that force stereotypical representations mostly in a very humorous manner that

would shatter the depressing reality of these banal images that portray themselves in three forms, namely, the Indian princess, stereotyping by Omission and the assumed stoic character traits.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akhtar, Salman. *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2009.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Long Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Grove Press, 1993.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.
- Alexie, Sherman. *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003.
- Alexie, Sherman. "Interview: Juliette Torrez Goes Long Distance with Sherman Alexie." *Vice & Verse* (31 August 1999). <http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa083199.htm>  
Accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan 2013.
- Alexie, Sherman, and Dennis West and Joan M. West. "Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: An Interview with Sherman Alexie." *Cineaste* 23, no. 4 (fall 1998): 29–32
- Banka, Ewelina. "Understanding 'Indian Killer' – *A Dream Like Mine* by M. T. Kelly and *Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie", *Conformity and Resistance in America*, edited by Jack Gutorow and Tomasz Lebiecki. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.
- Baxter, Andrea-Bess A review of *Old Shirts & New Skins*, *First Indian on the Moon*, and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, in *Western American Literature*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, November, 1994: 277-80.
- Bellante, Carl and Bellante, John. "Sherman Alexie: Literary Rebel." *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Nancy J. Peterson (Ed.) Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2009.
- Berglund, Jeff. "The Business of Writing: Sherman Alexie's meditations on Authorship." *Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Rouch. Utah: University of Utah Press, 2010.
- Berkhofer, R., Jr. *The white man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the present*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Bevis, William. "Native American Novels: Homing In." *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*, edited by Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Bhabha, Homi. *Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bird, S. Elizabeth. "Gendered construction of the American Indian in popular media."

- Journal of Communication*. 49, no. 3 (1999): 61–83
- Blewster, Kelley. (1999). “Tribal Visions.” *Conversation with Sherman Alexie*, edited by Nancy J. Peterson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- Callahan, Cynthia. *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Champagne, Duane. “The Rise and Fall of Native American Studies in the United States.” In *Native American Voices: A Reader*, edited by Susan Lobo, Steve Talbot and Traci L. Morris, Boston: Prentice Hall, 2012.
- Cheyfitz, Eric. “The (Post) Colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Indian Literatures and Federal Indian Law.” *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1974*, edited by Eric Cheyfitz, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Cline, Lynn. “About Sherman Alexie: A Profile.” *Ploughshares* 26.4 (Winter 2000-1): 197-202. [“Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People.”](http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/aboriginal-people/common-portrayals-aboriginal-people) Media Smarts: Canada’s Centre for Digital and Media Literacy. <http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/aboriginal-people/common-portrayals-aboriginal-people>. Accessed on 3 January 2013.
- Coulombe, Joseph L. *Reading Native American Literature*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Donoven, Georgie L. “Biography of Sherman Alexie.” In *Critical Insights: Sherman Alexie*. Leon Lewis (Ed). California: Salem Press, 2012.
- Donovan, Kathleen M. *Feminist Readings of Native American Literature: Coming to Voice*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998.
- Evans, Stephen F. “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians”. *The American Indian Quarterly*. Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 2001: 46-72
- Francis, Daniel. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995.
- Goebel, Bruce A. *Reading Native American Literature: A Teacher’s Guide*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 2004.
- Grassian, Daniel. *Understanding Sherman Alexie*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2005.
- Green, R. A. “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe.” *Folklore*, 99, no. 1 (1988): 30–55.

- Heldrich, Philip. “‘Survival = Anger x Imagination’ Sherman Alexie’s Dark Humor.”  
Sherman Alexie, edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010.
- Herman, Matthew. *Politics and Aesthetics in Contemporary Native American Literature: Across Every Border*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Highway, Tomson. “Spokane Words: Tomson Highway Raps with Sherman Alexie.”  
*Conversation with Sherman Alexie*, edited by Nancy J. Peterson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- Hollrah, Patrice E. M. *The Old Lady Trill, The Victory Yell: The Power of Women in Native American Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- James, Meredith K. *Literary and Cinematic Reservation in Selected Works of Native American Author Sherman Alexie*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.
- Kevles, Daniel J. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. California: University of California Press, 1985.
- Korsmo, Jamie. “‘Leaving the Rez’: Indigenizing Urban Space in Selected Short Stories by Sherman Alexie.” PhD diss., University of Central Oklahoma, 2011.
- Lawson, Angelica. “Native Sensibility and the Significance of Women in *Smoke Signals*.” In Sherman Alexie, edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010.
- Lieberman, Michael. “From Sherman Alexie at Big Think.” Retrieved from <http://bigthink.com/users/shermanalexie>. Accessed on 12 Jan 2013.
- Lundquist, Suzanne. *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Marubio, M. E. *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006.
- McClinton-Temple, Jennifer and Alan Velie. *Encyclopedia of American Indian Literature*. New York: Facts on File, 2007.
- Meissner, W. W. *Internalization in Psychoanalysis*. New York: International Universities Press, 1981.
- Merskin, Debra. “The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman.” *The Howard Journal of Communications*. 21, 2010: 345–366,
- Merskin, Debra. “The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman.”

- The Howard Journal of Communications*, 21, (2010): 345–366.
- Modell, Arnold H. *Object Love and Reality: An Introduction to a Psychoanalytic theory of Object relation*. New York: International Universities Press, 1968.
- Moore, Burness and Bernard Fine. *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Moore, David L. “Sherman Alexie: Irony, Intimacy, and Agency.” In *Native American Literature*, edited by Joy porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nygren, Ase. “A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie”, *Conversation with Sherman Alexie*, edited by Nancy J. Peterson. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.
- O’Shaughnessey, Margaret. “Sherman Alexie’s Transformation of “Ten Little Indians.” In *Sherman Alexie*, edited by Jeff Berglund and Jan Roush. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010.
- Owens, Louis. *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *The Invention of Native American Literature*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Peterson, Nancy J. *Conversations with Sherman Alexie*. Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2009.
- Pickering, Michael. *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Poupart, Lisa M. “The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians.” *Hypatia*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Indigenous Women in the Americas. (Spring, 2003): 86-100.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Pyke, Karen D. “What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don’t We Study it? Acknowledging Racism’s Hidden Injuries.” *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter 2010): 551-572.
- Riverwind Joseph. “The Basic Indian Stereotypes.” Peace Party and Blue Corn Comics. [http://www.corvallis.k12.mt.us/middle/staff/craigc/nas/links/documents/indian\\_stereotypes.pdf](http://www.corvallis.k12.mt.us/middle/staff/craigc/nas/links/documents/indian_stereotypes.pdf). Accessed on 8 Jan 2013.

- Roemer, Kenneth M. Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, edited by Joy porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Rycroft, Charles. *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
- Schafer, Roy. *Aspects of Internalization*. New York: International Universities Press, 1968.
- Schmidt, Robert. "Stereotyping Indians by Omission." *Peace Party and Blue Corn Comics*. (2007). Accessed on 8 Jan 2013.  
<http://www.bluecorncomics.com/omission.htm>
- Siskel, Gene and Roger Ebert, "Review of Smoke Signals." June 28, 1998," Retrieved from [http://www.fallsapart.com/smoke\\_signals\\_the\\_movie/](http://www.fallsapart.com/smoke_signals_the_movie/). Accessed on 4 May 2013.
- Smiley, Jess Smart. "An Hour With Sherman Alexie." (September 6, 2011). Retrieved <http://www.addictioninfo.org/articles/3876/1/Sherman-Alexie-on-writing-and-his-drinking-problem/Page1.html>. Accessed on 6 March 2013.
- Sonneborn, Liz. *Sherman Alexie*. New York: The Rosen Publishing group, Inc., 2013.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. C. Nelson and L. Grossbert (Eds). Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.
- Steinberg, Sybil S. "A review of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*". *Publishers Weekly*, 240, no. 29, (July 19 1993): 235.
- Steinfeldt J. A., Hagen P., and Steinfeldt M. C., "Psychological implications of stereotyping American Indians through the use of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos", Simon Eleanor L. (Ed.), *Psychology of Stereotypes*. NY: Nova Science, 2010: 170-185.
- Swann, Brian and Krupat, Arnold. *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Taylor, J. & Grundy, C. "Measuring Black Internalization of White Stereotypes About African Americans: The Nadanolization Scale", R.L. Jones (Ed.), *Handbook of tests and measures of Black populations*, (Vol. 2, pp. 217 – 226). Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry, 1996.
- Torok, Maria. "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse." *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, edited and translated by Nicholas T. Rand, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Torrez, Juliette. "Juliette Torrez Goes Long Distance with Sherman Alexie." *Vice & Verse*. (August 31, 1999). <http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa083199.htm>  
 Accessed on 19 Jan 2013.



- Vickers, Scott B. *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998.
- Wallis, Kenneth C. and Poulton, James L. *Internalization: The Origins and Construction of Internal Reality*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001.
- Walrond-Skinner, Sue. *A Dictionary of Psychotherapy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Weaver, Hilary N. 2012. "Indigenous Identity: What is it, and Who Really has It?", *Native American Voices: A Reader*, edited by Susan Lobo, Steve Talbot and Traci L. Morris, Boston: Prentice Hall, 1986.

Dissertação apresentada para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas, realizada sob a orientação científica de Isabel Oliveira Martins.

## **Native American women in Sherman Alexie's Short Stories:**

### **Stereotypical representations**

**Ahmed S. Lafi**

**RESUMO:** Esta dissertação tem como objectivo central o estudo da representação das mulheres nativas norte-americanas em três colectâneas de *short stories* do autor Sherman Alexie, especificamente em *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Firstfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) e *Ten Little Indians* (2003). São abordadas as formas como os nativos norte-americanos são representados, em geral, e as mulheres em particular, sobretudo a nível literário. A partir das representações estereotipadas e da noção de interiorização serão analisadas as representações presentes nas obras de Sherman Alexie, acima referidas. Nestas, o uso de humor permite que Sherman Alexie desconstrua a forma como as mulheres nativo-americanas são geralmente representadas, acabando por subverter a dominação e o racismo interiorizados, os quais contribuem para a deformação da identidade nativo-americana.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Nativos americanos; mulheres nativo-americanas; representações estereotipadas; interiorização.

**ABSTRACT:** This dissertation deals with the representation of Native American women in Sherman Alexie's three collections of short stories: *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Firstfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). It attempts to illustrate how stereotypical literary representations associated with Native American women work. It then examines how Native female characters in some of Alexie's short stories tend to unconsciously internalize those racial stereotypes or attempt to deviate from them while defining themselves in opposition to these socially imposed constructs. In effect, the study explores how Alexie's humorous representations of Native female characters ultimately subvert internalized racism and domination and deconstructs racial fallacies that distances and deforms rather than defines Native American identity.

**KEYWORDS:** Native Americans; Native American Women; stereotypical representation; internalization.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: A Biographical Account of Sherman Alexie’s Life and Literary Contribution.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Internalization and Stereotyping</b>	
<b>2.1.Internalization.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.2. Stereotypes and Native American Literature.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Stereotypical Representations of Native American Women.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3.1- The Stereotype of the Indian Princess.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>3.2- Stereotyping by Omission.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>3.3-The Stereotype of Native Stoicism.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>51</b>