



## TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS: A STUDY OF SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION BLUES

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to understand the trauma and plight of the Native Americans in the strife of finding their own self amidst a multi-racial society. The Native Americans are pictured as a collective group called Coyote Springs in *Reservation Blues*, where the protagonists struggle hard to prove themselves both as a member of their own native tribe as well as a part of the multi-cultural society. They strive hard to cope with each chaos and troubles that they face to strike a perfect balance between their lives on and off the reserve. They make every effort in defining themselves in their native culture and the multi-racial society where people of various community and culture co-exist.

The quest of self-identity revolves around the following categories. Firstly, the Native Americans attempt to create their own identity through their appearances, behaviour, their attitude towards the people they come in contact with, et cetera. Secondly, the sense of one's own land labels the Indians because it is the surrounding which defines them; by changing the environment, they change themselves. Thirdly, being the members of a particular tribe constitute in defining them as Indians as to where they belong; the characters belong to a particular tribal group which marks their history and paves way for their future. And lastly, the communal discrimination, both in a positive and negative light, shapes the Native Americans by realizing their stand in a multi-racial society.

**Key words:** self-identity, Native Americans, tribe, communal discrimination

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### INTRODUCTION

Young people living in the rural areas all over the world share similar dreams as their urban counterparts, swayed by the images transmitted by the television network and the lyrics of rock and roll music. But, the psychological perspective of an individual being born as a Native American forcibly undergoes the chaos and commotions in the quest of finding a place for themselves.

Sherman Alexie's first novel *Reservation Blues* (1995) centres on the American Dream and the price of success. Written in vivid narrative using

chiselled characters, *Reservation Blues* explores the life of the Native Americans who seek to recover the consequences of the colonisation and forge their lost identity in their own society. A critically acclaimed national best seller, the novel fetched him one of the fifteen '1996 American Book Awards'. It received mixed reaction from the readers. Though the plot was unwelcomed by a few for the poor portrayal of the tribal community of America, *The Boston Globe* claims it as an important voice in American Literature. A popular magazine, *Nation*, praises Sherman Alexie to be one of the best writers

on the big Indian reservation called 'The United States'.

*Kirkus Reviews* (online) states that:

... Alexie's text humorously mixes past and present, fanciful dreams with the harsh reality of a tribe whose traditional livelihood is fishing and who are now stuck on land with dammed-up rivers ... most poignant when dealing with Indian tradition, hope, and despair as his characters confront white religion and duplicity ... successfully dances around culture-clash clichés in this fresh, vibrant modern fairy tale.

A bewildered mix of personal experience, memory, dream, and history, Sherman Alexie uses his signatory style of writing extensively throughout *Reservation Blues*, which includes dark humour, sorrow and cultural awareness. He creatively fuses narratives, newspaper excerpts, songs, journal entries, visions, radio interviews, and dreams to explore the lifestyle of Indians, who are primarily individuals, and secondarily members of an ethnic group, which constitute the whole. The novel explores the representation of gender, the role of religion and faith, the effects of the church on traditional people, pop culture and mass media, tribal history and traditions, the place for music in a tribal community, humanity's plight of normality, the ways dreams and hopes direct the members of a tribe, the portrayal of white culture in both positive and negative light on an Indian reservation, racial oppression, familial relationships, the nature of magical realism and the differences between reservations and urban Indians. He also mentions about cultural assimilation on the relationships between Indian women and Indian men on the reservation. Alexie does not fall short to spread the soul of the reservation throughout the novel.

The novel weaves powerfully around the rise and fall of a rock and blues band of Indians from the Spokane Reservation located in Eastern Washington State. Robert Johnson's magic guitar, which he left with Thomas Builds-the-Fire, carries five young Indians off the reservation in the name of a *rock band*, from reservation bars to small-town taverns, from the cement trails of Seattle to

the concrete canyons of Manhattan. The band comprises of five Native Americans, including two women, who are misfits from their reservation and they name their team as 'Coyote Springs.'

With the magical guitar in their hand, which is a charm and a curse, Coyote Springs attracts the attention of the white people, from two white ladies (Betty and Veronica) to the agents of Cavalry Records (George Wright and Phil Sheridan) of New York. The novel fails to create a happy ending but through the despair and distraught that the characters undergo, Alexie frames the tale of power, tragedy, and ambition among contemporary Native Americans.

#### **Reservation Blues: Creation of Self-Identity**

Self-identity is a very complex idea and it is precisely synchronic. Identity struggles are more social than individualistic, because identifying one's self ultimately reflects their own history, culture and tradition, and projects their community to the outer world. Sense of one's own land, being an individual as well as a member of the tribe at the same time, the communal discriminations and the portrayal of the white culture are the essential factors which determine a person's self-identity. As different social interactions can alter self identities, individual perception of themselves change the social interactions. This is the goal of Stryker's theory of *structural symbolic interactionism*. There are two focal points in this theory; the first one posits the self in an interacting social space and the space becomes a reason for the individual's behaviour towards the society; whereas the latter one is where the individual's internal thought processes affect the society.

The Spokane Indian characters in *Reservation Blues* undergo humiliations and perennial hurts, throughout their journey towards success which they dream of but never attain. They confront the dilemma of, what Jerome Denuccio calls, how to be "real Indians," of how to find "their true names, their adult names" ("Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*" 86). They struggle with great effort to cope with the abuses, cynicism, dissuasions and despair in the hope of healing their pain but which ends up only in self-pity and self-

loathing. The self positions itself in a social space replete with memories, dreams and voices that invite attention and response that accommodate and negotiate if the self as an individual and a tribe is subject to emerge. The memories, dreams and voices form a dense network of social significations.

Anthony F. C. Wallace and R. D. Fogelson recognizes identity to be a cluster of myriad perceptions of uniqueness; in R. D. Fogelson's article "Perspectives on Native American Identity", he documents different types of identity with respect to being an individual and as a crowd: an 'ideal' identity is a representation of self that one wish to realize; a 'feared' identity is a negative phenomenon that one wish to avoid; a 'real' identity is which an individual relate to an accurate representation of the self or reference group; and a 'claimed' identity is one presented to others for authentication, challenge or negotiation in an effort to move the real identity closer to the ideal and further from the feared identity. He continues by relating each type of identity with the Native Americans that, their "ideal identity might be that of full blood; a feared identity might be a 'wannabe'; a 'real' identity is a person having three eighths degree of Indian blood" (41).

A Native American tries to fit into all types of identity. In regard to one of the concerts of Coyote Springs, *The Wellpinit Rawhide Press* covers what Junior Polatkin said, "I just want to be good at something" (*Reservation Blues* 228). Ideally, such a man will behave as the victor of a tribe; fearing, he will act in order to get fame; factiously, he will try to reclaim his lost ancestral history; and will claim himself through appearance, "marked by braids and shades, a headband, and a finger-woven sash, as a traditional leader" (Fogelson 42). The Native Americans are always hungry for claiming their own identity in a community, in one way or the other.

Objectively, it is a Native American's physical features that generally attributes them. In the novel, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the lead singer of Coyote Springs is a man with ". . . long, black hair pulled into braids . . . long torso . . . just marked by loneliness . . ." (*RB* 3-4).

Similarly, Victor Joseph's self-identification seems hilarious. Alexie compares him to John

Travolta, yet conveys the existence of poverty in the Spokane community, "He had won a few thousand dollars in Reno way back in 1979, just after he graduated from high school. He bought a closet full of silk shirts and polyester pants and had never had any money since then to buy anything new . . . but the clothes were tattered and barely held to his body. His wardrobe made him an angry man" (*RB* 12). Appearance of Junior Polatkin is of more refined, where he is, "A tall, good-looking buck with hair like Indians in the movies, long, purple-black, and straight, Junior was president of the Native American Hair Club" (13).

The Warm Water sisters, Chess and Checkers, from the Flathead reservation have their braids tucked under cowboy hats. There is the nameless character, referred to as the-man-who-was-probably-Lakota, described as having "cheekbones so big that he knocked people over when he moved his head from side to side" (11). Samuel Builds-the-Fire, who was once 'Washington State High School Basketball Player of the Year in 1956', lived up to high expectations and "defined himself" (98). Alexie's illustrations of each of his characters give importance to the construction of Native *and* American identity because it acts as a catalyst in the struggle to search for their individuality amidst their own and alien cultures.

Denuccio, in his article, "Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*" illuminates that, "Alexie's Indian characters are caught, as Bakhtin puts it, in the 'framework of *other people's words*' about them, a framework that can 'finalize and deaden' the self" (qtd. in 91). *Reservation Blues* brings out the attention that the Indians receive for their appearance. Sheridan and Wright recommend the band to Mr. Armstrong under the condition that Chess and Checkers has an "exotic, animal" appeal; Junior is "ethnically handsome"; Victor has a "grunge/punk" image; Thomas contrasts with "Buddy Holly glasses and crooked teeth" (*RB* 189-190). Yet, Alexie brings a totally contradicting idea to this general conception, when people mistake Coyote Springs. An airport crowd sees the band and thinks "those loud dark-skinned people might be hijackers" (218), "... Bows-and-arrows Indians.

Cowboys-and-Indians Indians" (239). The waitress at Carson's All-Night Restaurant entitles the duo as "Indians like in the western movies. Like Geronimo" (239), which is the way media and television picture these aborigines. The authentic identity of these Native Americans become difficult to recognize either because they are turning 'civilized' or the other communities forget them.

Erik Erikson, who introduced the concept of 'identity' into the social science literature, observes that, "identity was a processual or historical concept representing the cumulative effects of a series of life cynical nuclear conflicts" (Fogelson 42). The individuality of a man remains stable irrespective of their change when subjected to different scenarios, because, although the surrounding system sets a man for his survival, the eventual decision lies with the person to choose their course. "If an Indian chose the correct hand, he won everything, he won all the sticks. If an Indian chose wrong, he never got to play again. Coyote Springs had only one dream, one chance to choose the correct hand" (RB 220). Hence, choice matters for the characters in the novel, as well as for all the Native Americans in general, to find rays of goodness in their future.

Alexie also demonstrates that in his characters "there is always something that only [they themselves] can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing second-hand definition" (qtd in. Denuccio, 91). Thomas says in a conversation with the guitar "I'm going to change the world" (RB 13), which reveals his burning inner self to achieve something in his life. In another circumstance, Checkers identifies a "warrior desperation and the need to be superhuman in the poverty of a reservation" (114) in Thomas' eyes.

In the progress of the novel, the band is invited by the owner of Tipi Pole Tavern to play that weekend in the Flathead reservation at Arlee, Montana, by promising a sum of money. The reason behind the invitation is because Coyote Springs was an "all-Indian-band" (RB 51-52) which substantiates their identity. Later, they are known prominently as "the Indian band" (135).

Alexie's characters desire for betterment in their lives. They wish to hold themselves high and

preferred to be recognized by their own tribe and community. Hence, they refuse to stop their journey towards success, though they face a lot of hardships and sufferings. They somehow manage to see the outside world, create (or at the least try to create) a space by moulding themselves in an alien ground (physically), without letting go their traditional and cultural values (mentally) that prevent "the folding shut of the good part of [their] past" (Denuccio 94).

Checkers is not very proud of her identity except at few incidents, one being when she knows that Betty and Veronica could sing for them: "It would have been cool to have white women singing backup for us Indian women" (RB 185). Another instance is when Father Arnold introduces her as, "Some of you may know her as a member of Coyote Springs" (162). Even when she attends church out of her own will, Checkers is unable to shake away the thoughts about the band; it had already defined her.

There are also circumstances in the novel where the characters are denied of self-identity, though they crave for it. It is because of the environment that they are born and brought up in to. For example, Chess hopes for a life where she can decide everything on her own because all through her life she has been manipulated by men. She feels miserable that:

... even sweet, gentle Thomas covered her with his shadow. Even in his dreams and stories, Thomas covered her. She sang his songs; she played his music. She played for Phil Sheridan and George Wright and hoped for their approval ... Chess didn't know whether she should run from that shadow or curl up inside it. She wanted to do both. (212)

Alexie stresses the importance of the reservation in a Native American's life through the Tribal Chairman David WalksAlong, where he reports, "... My grandfather always told me you can take a boy off the reservation but you can't take a reservation off the boy" (227). "For Europeans, land has always possessed a close and at times metaphysical connection to kinship and descent, as can be inferred from such notions as *fatherland* and *motherland*" (Fogelson 48). In the novel, the reservation operates as a guardian to its people; the

band members look up to their homeland as their saviour. Eventually though the reservation start losing its potential, it does not let go its children, because "the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy" (RB 96). The song by Coyote Springs as a prologue to chapter 'My God Has Dark Skin' elucidates David's idea of being a member of a reservation:

My braids were cut off in the name of Jesus  
To make me look so white  
My tongue was cut out in the name of Jesus  
So I would not speak what's right  
.....  
I had my braids cut off by black robes  
But I know they'll grow again  
I had my tongue cut out by these black robes  
But I know I'll speak 'til the end  
..... (131-32)

The song elucidates the fact that the sense of belonging to the tribe cannot be eliminated out of the blood and soul of the Indians despite the external factors which hinders its significance. Alexie says though the white majority may try to claim the ownership of the people by providing hopes and expectations, ultimately, it ends in vain since they cannot get rid of the core outlook and feeling of being a part of the tribe.

Indians belonging to a particular reserve will always go back to the thoughts of their place and surroundings; the reservation cannot be detached from their souls. Though Chess, at one point, amazed by the beauty of the Spokane reservation, she cannot survive too long in the *alien* land: ". . . we should go back to Arlee. They like us there" (RB 187). She feels the kind of security only with her own people of the Flathead reservation: ". . . Those are our people. We don't have anywhere else to go anyway." (252). Similarly, Thomas cannot separate himself from his place of belonging, ". . . every part of him was Spokane Indian. . . . Spokane Indian Reservation was threatening to keep him" (256-257). He is emotionally attached to his Spokane reservation: ". . . they're my people. They're my Tribe. . . . we just let them down" (257). Land and descent merge as identity indicators in the expressions when Chess tells Thomas that, ". . .

Checkers and I live here. We're from here. We shouldn't leave" (77).

Native American's identities are recognized in accordance with their collective possession of land to attribute to sense of self and the outer world. 'Myth of blood' elucidates the symbolic significance of blood where the blood quantum is considered as the source of health, survival and even death. The blood labels the tribe to which a native belongs. Full blood or pure blood indicates that the person belongs to a particular tribe for generations; he can claim all the possible rights to that particular tribe. There are people who are labelled as half-blood, quarter-blood, three-eighth blood et cetera, which signifies that the pure blood in them got depleted to their successive generations which deprived them of their rights. This myth helps to set apart different communities in a society.

Another myth that constitutes the tribal communities is the 'myth of nomadism' which affirms that Indians are consistently, migratory. They are always unable to settle at one place because of the urge to move on; they do not cultivate the soil nor make their mark on the landscape; they are gypsies who in spite of their inability to have a habitat are in want of recognition from their own nation and outer world. Fogelson brilliantly states it as, "they are *on* the land but not *of* the land" (49). When pondered deep, the Indians traditionally live an uncomfortable life either mainly due to the unnecessary troubles from the white community which threatens them or to understand the progression of the world and try to transform themselves to a more 'worldly' people. But their progression is always disrupted by the dominating communities because traditionally the latter define them as people encircled within a reservation where they are confined, controlled and civilized.

Another attribute in the quest of identifying one's self is the close connections that a Native American has to his Indian community. The sense of being an individual and a member of a tribe and community define an Indian's individuality. Alexie, in *Reservation Blues*, succeeds in portraying the Spokane community in the flow of the novel by continuing the thread of the tribe through the characters and plot. For instance, the Spokane

Indians or any tribe for that matter, have certain rules and conduct to be followed; and only if they follow them they are considered as members of their tribe. But in the path of civilization the community people lose their rules, conduct and identity. Spokanes, as well as Alexie, do not want any more Native Americans suffering the same crisis that they faced.

A member of a tribal community possesses a natural sense of 'belonging' towards their tribe than towards their self. Alexie gives a picture of that sense of oneness through the image where the guitar forces Thomas to create a band, "'Y'all need to play songs for your people. They need you. Those two boys need you'" (RB 23). When a person takes his stance in a community he is considered as a part of that community, and as a result they form a peaceful locality. Thomas, who is a part of a tribe, wants his songs and stories to save everybody. Alexie proudly comments on his tribe that, "The Indian world is tiny, every other Indian dancing just a powwow away. Every Indian is a potential lover, friend, or relative dancing over the horizon, only a little beyond sight. Indians need each other that much; they need to be that close, trying themselves to each other and closing their eyes against the storms" (151).

In the novel, Chess voices out for the whole tribal community. Sometimes, she acts like a guardian or an ancestor of her tribe by pulling or trying to pull back the Native Americans, preventing them from going astray. "She hated Indian men who chased after white women; she hated white women who chased after Indian men" (81). She judged such people to be traitors to their own tribe and self. In contrast, the attitude of being indifferent to one's own society has to be rectified. When Checkers says she hates being an Indian, Alexie thought provokingly rebukes her idea through the response of Chess: "You ain't really Indian unless there was some point in your life that you didn't want to be" (98).

'Coyote Springs' are considered as a collective phenomenon as if the band's name implies a character in itself. Even after Junior's suicide, "Coyote Springs didn't have the energy to sing or mourn properly" (277), signifying the

importance of teamwork and cooperation. Ironically, the band disbands after Junior's death because they feel the loss of one voice will make them imperfect.

An underlying reality in the novel is that the 'white' culture plays a pivotal role in the development and decline of the Native Americans' identity. Whites have their own distorted notions of Indianness, but even with such (mis)representations, *real* Indians manage to stay "present at the margins, insinuating their way into Euro-American discourse, often attempting to nudge notions of Indianness in directions they found useful" (qtd. in Ford, 208).

The society that the characters inhabit is largely shaped by the people they face, which defines their identity and dictate the status each person holds. In the novel *Reservation Blues*, the Spokane community presents a complex system with intrinsic rules on exclusion, power, occupation and religion. The white culture is portrayed under both positive and negative shade of gray, which decides the Indian's destiny. For instance, Samuel is popular among the people regardless of his nativity; "Even the white people knew how good that Indian boy played" (RB 97). On the contrary, Checkers recalls a sight where a Native American is belittled by a Euro-American man. She sees a white man spit into an old Indian's open hand when the latter shows up for food. Though the old man wipes it and offers his hand again, he receives nothing but spit. This picture sheds a negative light in the mind of Checkers, and also to the readers.

The majority of the white people depicted in this novel, help the all-Indian band to reach out to a world out-of-the-reservation. The help is connoted in different notions even among the band members. Though Chess gets worried when they are invited to sing for a price (at Seattle), Victor responds that they should be grateful for the offer. He says, "Strangers ask us to sing for them, and they'll pay us a thousand bucks. . ." (125).

Alexie addresses the fine face of the white race through the words of Chess; when Thomas fears the whites for consuming their lives, Chess replies that, "Not every white person wants to kill an Indians . . . Everybody wants to be an Indian" (RB 168). She says that whites who bond with Indians never feel to get separated. The white race harasses

the Indians just to portray their dominance out of their jealousy. Indians always feel that the white people own everything: food, houses, clothes, and children. Whereas, in the novel, the whites are pictured jealous of the Native Americans because they feel that the Indians possess everything that the whites do not; hence, the whites are desperate to be Indians.

On the contrary, Douglas Ford, in his article, "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues", quoted Philip J. Deloria's words in her essay "Playing Indian", about the formation of American identity when, "Indians provided figuration for a selfhood separate from England. By 'playing Indian,' Americans created 'a new identity-American-that was both aboriginal and European and yet was also neither'" (qtd. in Ford, 202-203). Whereas, Michelle's ironical words in her article seems like addressing the whites, "Oh, quit trying to be Indian. . ." (471).

Alexie do not blame the whites solely for the tribe's destiny. Though they are also a reason, Indians are also equally and highly responsible for themselves yet they do not plead guilty. The whites keep trying to change the Natives but it never worked, because they fight and never quit fighting with the whites, irrespective of their orders. "*We keep winning the war. But you won't surrender*" (237).

Owing to the debt to the Native American community for killing many Indians during the war, Phil Sheridan and George Wright are brought back in the novel by Alexie. Wright regret for his past actions: "Wright looked at the Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians beaten, scarred by smallpox and frost bite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own hands and saw the blood stains there" (244).

The differing views of cultural assimilation feature prominently in the novel, where the Indian characters who are unable to carry over their tradition and find their self placed amidst a white society, lose their voice and try to live a life harmless to all but them.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "majority of the American Indian and Alaska Native alone-or-in combination population (78 percent)

lived outside of American Indian and Alaska Native areas" (qtd. in Kellnerová 12). The reason is due to education, and the pressurizing and domination of the white race that they feel agitated and decide to stand on their own legs in equal position with the whites.

In the beginning, Indians show the immigrants ways to live in another land. But they misuse the smooth relationship and taint the environment, in a way unsuitable for the Indian way of life. Native Americans are wise and lived at peace with the Earth, whereas the whites spoil them by introducing technologies which ruin the former's pleasant life. Bribery, menaces, alcohol and manipulations are the weapons through which these reservations and its people lose their lands. For example, Samuel, who appears as a drunkard in the novel, represents the recurring liquor problem in the reservations, which incline the tribal people towards self-destruction.

Many of Alexie's critics question his usage of satire, stereotypes and his references to white popular culture. Popular culture is the weapon used in opposition to Native Americans by the white society that exclude, misrepresent, and exploit them throughout their popular culture to the extreme where they lose their feeling of being a part of their own country. In the novel, Victor and Checkers serve the best examples for being a victim of the so-called popular culture. Victor turn spellbound by the American popular culture, ". . . a culture that is noted primarily for its investment in constantly changing trends" (Tellefsen 126). He lives his life dedicated to desire, but the incapability to achieve his desire ends up in him being scorned by the pop culture. Foreign culture and people fascinates Checkers too, and at one point of time she fancies being born as a non-Indian. But, eventually American culture condemns her.

The novel also proves that the white race of people will go to any extreme to attain their target; when Cavalry Records rejects Coyote Springs but does not give up on Indians, they rope in Betty and Veronica by faking their identity. They discuss and confer that, "We dress them up a little. Get them into the tanning booth. Darken them up a bit. Maybe a little plastic surgery on those cheekbones .

. . Dye their hair black. Then we'd have Indians. People want to hear Indians" (267).

When the blues stir up memories for the Spokanes, the white men disgrace them stating that their music do not make any sense. Indians forget to realize the fact that the so called 'popular culture' could be their weapon to construct or reconstruct their own identity amidst the complex cultures in the society. But Thomas realizes this at a point, and fears that the band "could make us rock stars" (211).

Alexie implies that popular culture is the American identity; hence, his characters in the novel are caught in between the cultural paradoxes and struggle hard to create a sense of self for them. Checkers is disappointed with her descent and wish she could be like the 'perfect white girls' who look always pretty in their white dresses. The characters are so unsure about their Indian identity and are in a constant search for it at their reservation and in the city. They are least recognized by the dominating culture. Like Douglas Ford, in his article, stated that, "The authentic amidst our midst becomes harder to recognize" ("Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues" 212), Alexie says elsewhere during Coyote Springs' trip to the city that, "If any New Yorkers had stopped to look, they would have seen three Indians slow dancing, their hair swirling in the wind . . . . It could have been on cover of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*" (RB 230).

Alexie, who belongs to the tribe of Spokane Indians of mixed blood, seems be caught in the cultural paradoxes like his characters. He undergoes a constant struggle within him regarding his identity; and he states his feelings through the poem 'Reservation Mathematics' which he incorporated into one of his novels:

Mixed-up and mixed-blood  
I sometimes hate  
the white in me  
when I see their cruelty  
and I sometimes hate  
the Indian in me  
when I see their weakness (*First Indian on the Moon* 43)

The characters in the novel are free to leave and they often do, but at the other end they find boundaries, filled with people who shun their

identity. As soon as they become more famous off the reservation, and come in contact with the white people, their popularity fades. The tribe dislikes the band and is unfriendly towards them. When Thomas conversed with an elder Indian woman, he asks her the reason behind his band to be so detested. She replies logically that, "The Christians don't like your devil's music. The traditional don't like your white man's music. The Tribal Council don't like you're more famous than they are. Nobody likes those white women with you. We spit in their shadows. We don't want them here" (RB 179). When the puzzled Thomas states that everyone liked them earlier, the woman replies, "Before you left the reservation, before you left" (179). The conversation reflects the hostile environment which confines the self-identity of the characters.

The Native American visualises their 'real' identity as a deprived community fighting for their privileges. Tragedy and poverty are two themes which run across the novel, and which stand as a major hindrance in the quest of searching the self. Alexie, in his *Reservation Blues*, brought in the pitiable reality of the people living on the reservations who ". . . woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U. S. D. A. commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored" (14). Like Thomas, every other individual on the reservation face misfortunes either because the tragedy in their life leads them to poverty or they are poor.

Poverty is a malady which plagues the Native Americans. They were once wealthy with the culture, customs and tradition and lived harmoniously with nature. But in due course, they became poor and could not rise to the level of the alien world because of the "little exposure to formal education and the skills valued in a rapidly industrializing society" (Hellwig 325). It is the main reason that they are victimized by the whites. Coyote Springs, for the most part, is formed in the hope to earn money and to live a better life.

None on the reserve leads a happy life as an Indian. The shortage of money reflected in each and every household. Thomas has a television at his



home which constantly reminds him of all the things that he does not own. The band starts their concerts from small reservation gigs, which proves their hunger for fame, fortune and recognition, to make little money. The band arrives at Seattle, uninformed that they had to participate in the 'battle of bands', with only the factor of money in their minds. When Victor recommends their return, Thomas replies, "We don't have enough money to get home" (RB 136). Coyote Springs seizes almost all the opportunities because they lack money.

Tragedy is a part of the past in the lives of the tribes on the reserve. Thomas loses his mother to cancer and survives an always drunk father, who is a great basketball player, but found no success in his career. Samuel's shattered dreams lead to his depression and make him poor. The tragic events of his father predict, in a way, the fate of Coyote Springs.

Likewise, every individual on the reservation have their story of tragic experiences. Chess and Checkers faced a tragic incident when they were kids. They had a younger brother who died of illness, and a depressed mom who died soon after him. The father is left alone with Chess and Checkers, but has a hard time in being normal. He drinks more than he ever did and gets mad all the time. They become poorer than they already are.

#### Conclusion

The novel proffers hope in spite of the despair that the characters face. Though Alexie concludes the novel with a spirit of hope, he does not provide a solution or a 'happy-ending' to it. He has explicitly briefed out all the existing dilemmas in the Native American society-suppression, poverty, tragedy, alcoholism et cetera. These are the problems that an Indian has to overcome to distinguish him apart from others and create a place in the society. Unfortunately, any of the characters in the novel cannot or is not allowed to prevail over these hurdles.

The factors which hinder the path of the Coyote Springs are purely external. Their hopes to escape their tragic and poor life are lost as they fail their audition. They are not offered a second chance, and they are so poor to try again. Since they do not succeed, they return to their reservation,

where they are unwelcomed. The white community too, lures them with false hopes and dreams, which in reality they fail to provide with. The tribe feels that the Coyote Springs would lose their culture and tradition to the white majority. Hence, they oppose their success towards acculturation. Finally, they are left stranded in a desert called 'nowhere' because they can neither imbibe and assimilate with the white culture, nor they can live happily on the reserve.

At the end of the novel, the fear of their future makes Junior commit suicide; Victor is still unsure of his upcoming and wanders around the reservation; Thomas, Chess and Checkers move away from Spokane to Arlee in the hope of starting a new life from scratch with a chance to live like a real family who truly care for each other. Hopefully, "Songs were waiting for them in the city" (306).

Thus, American Indians strived hard and still find it difficult to cope with the dilemmas and confrontations in order to create an identity for themselves. They make every effort in bringing their lives on and off the reserve to a state of equilibrium, by defining themselves in a mixed society of people belonging to various communities and cultures. Through *Reservation Blues*, Sherman Alexie suggests that there are no simple solutions to such emotionally and historically complex problems. Rather he believes that it will take a real long time for the American Indians to evolve, cope and assert their identity in this multi-racial society.

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