

Investigating Racism in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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Abstract

Racism remains a persistent global issue that affects individuals and communities through interpersonal discrimination and structural inequality. This study examines the representation of racism in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, focusing on the experiences of the protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr. (Junior), as a Native American teenager navigating life between the Spokane Indian Reservation and a predominantly white high school in Reardan. The background of this study lies in the continued marginalization of Native American communities and the need to analyze literary works as reflections of racial realities. The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the forms of racism depicted in the novel. Using a qualitative descriptive method and applying the racism theory proposed by Benjamin P. Bowser (2017) as the analytical framework, this study examines individual, cultural, and institutional racism portrayed in the narrative. The findings reveal that racism operates simultaneously at personal and structural levels, limiting opportunities while intensifying identity conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

Racism remains a pervasive global issue that shapes social structures, institutions, and individual experiences. Racism is defined as “a form of prejudice that generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of the group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases it leads to violence” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). It manifests in various forms, ranging from overt discrimination and racial violence to more subtle expressions such as stereotyping, social exclusion, and unequal access to opportunities. Structural racism, for instance, refers to “the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice.” (Bailey et al.,

2017, p.1). Despite legal advances, racial inequality persists as a foundational element within educational systems, economic structures, and cultural life. For marginalized communities, racism is not occasional or isolated; it is a constant force shaping identity, limiting opportunity, and restricting social mobility.

Racism is also sustained through institutional structures that reinforce racial hierarchies and unequal power relations. Structural racism refers to the historical and ongoing reinforcement of racial inequality through interconnected institutions that distribute resources and opportunities unevenly across racial groups (Clark et al., 2022). In educational contexts, racism does not only appear in explicit discriminatory acts but is often embedded within policies, practices, and social norms that shape students' experiences and opportunities. Racism has been defined as “the creation or maintenance

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of a racial hierarchy, supported through institutional power” (Solórzano et al., 2002, as cited in Kohli et al., 2017). This perspective highlights that racism functions not merely as individual prejudice but as a systemic process that organizes access to resources, privileges, and opportunities within society.

Institutional racism is often embedded within social systems and organizational practices, making it less visible but equally influential in shaping unequal outcomes. According to the Macpherson Report, institutional racism refers to “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behaviour that amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping that disadvantages minority ethnic people” (Fernando, 2017, p.112). This definition emphasizes that racism does not always arise from intentional hostility but can be reproduced through routine institutional practices and assumptions that privilege dominant groups while disadvantaging minority communities. In educational environments, such institutional dynamics may influence access to resources, expectations placed on students, and the ways minority identities are perceived and treated within predominantly white institutions.

Racism in contemporary societies also frequently appears in subtle or indirect forms. Morrison and Kiss note that “traditional expressions of racism... have become unacceptable to most Americans. However, it did not mean that racism has disappeared. Instead, many psychologists contend that traditional racist attitudes and behaviors have assumed more covert forms” (Morrison & Kiss, 2017, p.1). These covert forms of racism are often expressed through beliefs that discrimination is no longer a significant issue or that minority groups receive undeserved advantages. Because such attitudes are commonly framed as concerns about fairness or merit, individuals may not perceive them as racist, even though they continue to reinforce racial inequality.

Literature serves as a powerful medium for examining the complexities of race and discrimination. Through narrative and characterization, literary works can reveal how

racism operates both personally and structurally, since racism is understood not only as individual prejudice but also as a social process shaped by power relations and institutional structures (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017). One significant contemporary work that addresses these issues is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. The novel follows Arnold Spirit Jr., a Native American boy who transfers from the Spokane Indian Reservation to a predominantly white high school in Reardan, Washington, in search of better educational opportunities. As he navigates two contrasting social environments, Junior confronts poverty, cultural alienation, interpersonal prejudice, and institutional inequality.

The novel was written by Sherman Alexie, a prominent Native American author whose works frequently explore racism, colonialism, and the social realities faced by Indigenous communities. In recent years, the sexual harassment allegations against Alexie that surfaced during the Me Too movement highlight a contradiction between his public critique of oppression and his personal conduct. While systemic racism forms an important background that influences social dynamics and power relations, it does not justify harmful behavior. Instead, the case illustrates how marginalized figures can both critique oppression and still be held accountable for misconduct. While these controversies have generated broader discussions about accountability in literary communities, this study focuses specifically on the representation of racism in his novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

The novel reflects broader historical and social realities faced by Native American communities, including underfunded schools, limited healthcare access, economic hardship, and cultural marginalization. According to Malo-Juvera (2017), Junior's position as a Spokane Indian student in a white school demonstrates how Native Americans are socially “Othered” through negative stereotypes and unequal power relations, particularly when Indigenous identity is associated with poverty and inferiority.

Critics have also noted that literary representations of reservation life often emphasize poverty and social difficulties, which may unintentionally reinforce stereotypical views of

Indigenous communities. In many narratives, themes such as economic hardship, alcoholism, and limited educational opportunities are frequently highlighted as defining features of reservation life. While these depictions may reflect real social challenges, focusing heavily on these aspects can shape readers' perceptions of Indigenous communities as primarily characterized by dysfunction or deprivation. As Priyam (2025) suggests, discussions of minority representation in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* often center on the portrayal of poverty and marginalization within the reservation, which can influence how Indigenous identity is interpreted by readers. This critique highlights the importance of examining how literary narratives balance the depiction of social realities with the risk of reinforcing simplified or stereotypical images of Indigenous life.

Junior's experiences highlight how racism operates at multiple levels through discriminatory behavior, cultural stereotypes, and systemic disadvantages embedded within institutions. His struggle between maintaining his Native American identity and adapting to white-dominated spaces illustrates the psychological impact of racial division and social exclusion. This perspective aligns with Sally Haslanger's understanding of racism as "a set of practices, attitudes, social meanings, and material conditions, that systematically reinforce one another" (Haslanger, 2017). Through this framework, the novel reveals how racism is not only expressed through individual prejudice but also through broader social structures that shape Junior's everyday experiences.

The concept of survivance, introduced by Gerald Vizenor, provides an additional perspective for understanding Indigenous representation in literature. Survivance refers to an active presence that combines survival, resistance, and cultural continuity in the face of colonial oppression, emphasizing Indigenous agency rather than victimhood (Vizenor, 1999). In the context of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, elements of survivance can be seen in Junior's determination to pursue education while maintaining a connection to his cultural identity. This perspective suggests that despite the structural racism and

social challenges depicted in the novel, Indigenous characters continue to demonstrate resilience.

This study aims to analyze the forms of racism depicted in the novel and examine how they affect Junior's identity, opportunities, and personal development. By applying racism theory as the analytical framework, this research explores interpersonal prejudice, cultural racism, and institutional discrimination presented throughout the narrative. Literature serves as an important medium for representing social realities and revealing issues that may be overlooked or concealed within society. As Khairunnisa and Hidayati (2023) state, "Literature is often used by the author to describe the condition of the society that is usually covered up in society." Through this perspective, literary works can provide insight into social inequalities. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary texts portray racial inequality, particularly within the context of Native American experiences.

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of racism in the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) by Sherman Alexie. A qualitative approach is used because the data analyzed in this study are presented in the form of words, phrases, and sentences rather than numerical data. Qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret meanings, explore social realities, and understand how particular phenomena are represented within literary texts. In literary studies, qualitative methods are commonly used to examine themes, narratives, and ideological representations embedded in texts. According to Darmawan (2025), qualitative descriptive research analyzes qualitative data such as words or behaviors that have been observed and collected from the object of study. Therefore, this method is appropriate for examining how racism is depicted through the narrative structure, characterization, and dialogue within the novel.

The primary data source of this research is the novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), written by Sherman Alexie. This novel was selected because it portrays the

experiences of a Native American teenager, Arnold Spirit Jr., who navigates life between the Spokane Indian Reservation and a predominantly white school environment. The novel provides rich textual material that illustrates various forms of racism, including racial discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, and structural inequality experienced by Native Americans. The data used in this study consist of textual evidence that reflects racist attitudes, actions, or social conditions depicted in the narrative. These data include dialogues between characters, narrative descriptions, monologues, and other textual elements that reveal discriminatory practices, racial stereotypes, and unequal power relations within the social environment portrayed in the novel.

The data collection process was conducted through several systematic steps. First, the researcher carefully read the novel multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, characters, and thematic elements related to racism. Repeated reading was necessary to ensure that the researcher could identify subtle forms of racial representation that might not be immediately visible during the initial reading. Second, the researcher identified and highlighted words, phrases, sentences, or passages that indicate elements of racism in the narrative. These textual excerpts were selected based on their relevance to issues such as racial discrimination, stereotyping, marginalization, and institutional racism experienced by the protagonist and other Native American characters. Third, the selected data were documented and organized into a data inventory table containing the quotation, page number, context of the event, and preliminary interpretation of the racist elements reflected in the text. This systematic organization helped ensure that the analysis remained structured and transparent. To facilitate the analysis, the researcher also produced an excerpt table that records selected quotations from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie along with their theory and analysis. The table helps categorize instances of racism and provides a clear reference for the analytical process. An example of the excerpt table used in this study is presented below.

Table 1. Example of excerpt table

No	Excerpt	Theory	Analysis
1	Everybody stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO.	“Individual acts of racial animus were social in origin and did not originate solely from individuals actor. Individual Whites learned their animus as part of their socialization.” Bowser (2017)	When Junior arrives at the predominantly White school, the students stare at him as if he is strange or abnormal. This reaction reflects Bowser’s concept of individual racism. This indicates that the students’ behavior is shaped by socially learned racial attitudes toward Native Americans.

After the data were collected, the analysis was conducted using the theory of racism proposed by Benjamin P. Bowser (2017). Bowser’s (2017) theory was chosen because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding racism not only as individual prejudice but also as a broader social system embedded in institutions, social structures, and cultural practices. Through this theoretical lens, the researcher examined how racism operates within the narrative of the novel, including how racial hierarchies, discriminatory attitudes, and unequal power relations are constructed and maintained. The analysis focuses on identifying the forms of racism represented in the text and interpreting how these forms influence the experiences and identity formation of the protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr.

Furthermore, the analysis also explores how the protagonist responds to experiences of racism, including his emotional reactions, coping strategies, and resistance toward discriminatory treatment. By examining both the representation of racism and the characters’ responses, the study

aims to provide a deeper understanding of how racism shapes the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in literary narratives. Finally, the findings of the analysis are presented descriptively in order to explain the forms, patterns, and meanings of racism reflected in the novel. The results are discussed through detailed interpretations supported by textual evidence and relevant theoretical perspectives, allowing the study to contribute to a broader understanding of racial issues represented in contemporary Native American literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* reveals that racism is represented through various forms of social interaction, institutional conditions, and cultural perceptions experienced by the protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr. The findings indicate that racism in the novel is not limited to direct discriminatory behavior but also appears through stereotypes, exclusion, and unequal treatment embedded in educational and social environments. These forms of racism reflect broader social structures in which Native American identity is positioned within unequal power relations.

Based on the textual data collected from the novel, the representation of racism can be classified into several categories in accordance with the racism theory proposed by Benjamin P. Bowser (2017), namely individual, cultural, and institutional racism. Each category demonstrates how racial inequality affects Junior's daily experiences, influences his sense of identity, and shapes his responses toward both reservation life and white-dominated society. The discussion below explains each form of racism through selected textual evidence and relates it to the broader social meaning presented in the narrative.

The analysis identifies cultural racism as one of the forms of racism represented in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. According to Benjamin P. Bowser (2017), cultural racism is the blueprint for the operation of institutional racism in American life. It is the objective of institutions to fulfill cultural scripts. This concept explains that cultural assumptions about race influence how institutions operate and shape the social

environment in which individuals interact. Cultural racism can be understood as the instillation of the ideology of inferiority in the values, language, imagery, symbols, and unstated assumptions of the larger society (Williams et al., 2019).

One representation of cultural racism appears in the statement:

"Where is hope?" I asked. "Who has hope?"

"Son," Mr. P said. "You're going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad, sad reservation." (Alexie, 2007, p.50-51)

This statement reflects a cultural narrative that portrays Native American reservations as places associated with hopelessness and limited opportunity. The idea that hope increases the farther one moves away from the reservation suggests that Indigenous spaces are culturally constructed as inferior environments. This perception illustrates Bowser's (2017) argument that cultural racism functions as a blueprint for institutional behavior. Cultural beliefs about racial hierarchy shape how institutions function and how resources are distributed. Institutions often unconsciously reproduce these cultural assumptions, embedding them within social structures. The statement suggesting that opportunities increase as one moves away from the reservation reflects a cultural narrative that frames Indigenous spaces as inferior or lacking. According to Bowser (2017), these cultural scripts influence institutional behavior, reinforcing systemic inequality by normalizing the marginalization of minority communities. The idea that hope increases as one moves farther away from the reservation reflects a cultural narrative that portrays Indigenous communities as spaces without opportunity. Bowser (2017) explains that cultural racism functions as the ideological framework that guides institutional behavior and resource distribution. When Native spaces are culturally constructed as inferior or hopeless, institutions are less likely to invest in them. The excerpt, therefore, reveals how cultural racism shapes perceptions of place and opportunity, reinforcing the marginalization of Indigenous communities by normalizing the belief that success

can only be achieved within predominantly White environments.

Another representation of cultural racism can be seen in the statement:

What was I doing at Reardan, whose mascot was an Indian, thereby making me the only other Indian in town? (Alexie, 2007, p.63)

This excerpt highlights the contradiction between symbolic representation and actual inclusion. Junior notices that he is the only Native student at the school, while Native identity is represented only through a mascot. Cultural racism operates through socially shared beliefs and cultural norms that shape how racial groups are represented and perceived in society. As noted by Akinyemiju Toksooko et al. (2025), cultural racism can be understood as a system of beliefs (ideology) and societal way of life (culture) that influences how racial meanings are constructed and reproduced. These beliefs often manifest through symbolic representations that reinforce racial hierarchy and normalize stereotypes. This occurrence demonstrates how cultural stereotypes about Native Americans are embedded in institutions and influence how minority identities are represented. In connection with Bowser's (2017) theory, he believes that the concept of cultural racism also includes symbolic representations that reinforce racial hierarchy. Cultural narratives often portray minority groups through stereotypes or marginal roles while centering Whiteness as the norm. In this case, the presence of a Native American mascot alongside the statement that Junior is the only Indian student reflects how Indigenous identity is reduced to symbolic representation rather than recognized as a lived identity. Bowser (2017) suggests that cultural racism shapes institutional environments by embedding these symbolic hierarchies into everyday spaces. It aligns with the excerpt, which exposes how cultural racism transforms Indigenous identity into a symbolic representation while excluding Native individuals from institutional spaces. The presence of a Native mascot alongside the absence of Native students highlights a contradiction in which Indigenous identity is appropriated for cultural symbolism but marginalized in reality. This dynamic reflects how institutions normalize stereotypical

representations of minority groups while failing to include them meaningfully within the social environment.

When Indigenous identity is culturally constructed through stereotypes rather than recognized as a lived identity, institutions may unconsciously reproduce practices that marginalize Native communities. For example, the novel also depicts how reservation schools receive outdated textbooks and inadequate educational resources. These conditions reflect institutional racism because the education system distributes resources unevenly between predominantly White schools and Native American reservation schools. The cultural imagery of the Native mascot, therefore, functions as the ideological framework that justifies this inequality. By trivializing Indigenous identity through symbolic representation, cultural racism creates the assumptions that allow institutions to neglect Native communities without questioning the disparity. Thus, the mascot reveals how cultural narratives about Indigenous inferiority influence institutional practices. As Bowser (2017) argues, cultural racism gives the underlying framework that guides institutional behavior. In this context, the cultural reduction of Native identity to a mascot helps legitimize structural inequalities such as underfunded schools and outdated textbooks, demonstrating how cultural racism operated as the blueprint for institutional racism.

Another form of cultural racism can be explained through the concept proposed by Benjamin P. Bowser. According to Bowser (2017), cultural racism (the presumption of White supremacy) precedes and preconditions institutional expressions of racism. Without racist cultural scripts, institutional expressions of racism would not occur (p. 581). Bowser (2017) emphasizes that cultural racism functions as an ideological foundation that legitimizes racial hierarchy. Cultural racism operates through widely shared beliefs, values, and stereotypes that associate superiority with Whiteness. These cultural assumptions shape social perceptions and expectations about success, intelligence, and opportunity. Junior's parents stated that:

"Who has the most hope?" I asked. Mom and Dad looked at each other. They studied each

other's eyes, you know, like they had antennas and were sending radio signals to each other. And then they both looked back at me.

"Come on," I said. "Who has the most hope?"

"White people," my parents said at the same time. " (Alexie, 2007, p.52)

This excerpt suggests that opportunity and success are associated with whiteness rather than Native identity. This perception reflects Bowser's (2017) concept of cultural racism, which states that cultural racism (the presumption of White supremacy and Black inferiority) precedes and preconditions institutional expressions of racism. This proclamation indicates that cultural beliefs about racial hierarchy shape how individuals perceive opportunity and reinforce the idea that whiteness is linked to success. The suggestion that "Hope is White" can be interpreted through the concept of double consciousness introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois, which describes the psychological tension experienced by marginalized individuals who must view themselves through both their own identity and the perspective of a dominant racial group (Du Bois, 1903). Junior becomes aware that his identity as a Spokane Indian is judged within a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness, creating a conflict between maintaining his Indigenous identity and pursuing opportunities within a white-dominated system.

Junior's statement reflects the internalization of cultural racism, where the dominant cultural narrative associates success and opportunity with Whiteness. Bowser (2017) argues that cultural racism operates through ideological assumptions that frame White identity as the standard of progress and achievement. By describing hope as white, Junior reveals how these cultural narratives shape his perception of opportunity. Rather than seeing success as universally accessible, he perceives it as connected to racial identity. This excerpt, therefore, illustrates the psychological impact of cultural racism, demonstrating how dominant racial ideologies influence how marginalized individuals understand their own potential.

Bowser's (2017) other concept of cultural racism was again used to investigate another form of racism. He stated that racial motives are inherently deniable. Racism is evident only in

outcomes. The declining significance of race is an insight about post-1960s institutional change that is simply incorrect. Race has not declined in significance. Only the institutional mechanics for maintaining racial hierarchy changed. (Bowser, 2017, p.575). Bowser (2017) notes that modern racism often becomes difficult to identify because racial motives are frequently denied. Instead of explicit discrimination, contemporary racism operates through institutional outcomes that maintain racial hierarchy. Cultural racism functions through socially shared beliefs, values, and cultural messages that shape how racial groups are perceived and treated in society. Cogburn (2019) describe cultural racism as societal beliefs and norms that promote the idea that certain cultures are superior while others are inferior, often expressed through stereotypes and cultural narratives. The stereotype about Indigenous people and alcohol illustrates how racial assumptions persist even when individuals attempt to deny racist intentions. Bowser (2017) argues that although the forms of racism may change over time, race continues to shape social outcomes and maintain inequality.

I mean, the thing is, plenty of Indians have died because they were drunk. And plenty of drunken Indians have killed other drunken Indians. But my grandmother had never drunk alcohol in her life. Not one drop. That's the rarest kind of Indian in the world. I know only, like, five Indians in our whole tribe who have never drunk alcohol. And my grandmother was one of them. (Alexie, 2007, p.172)

This excerpt is the representation of cultural racism that appears in the novel. Junior emphasizes that his grandmother never drank alcohol, challenging common stereotypes about Native Americans. This challenge reflects Bowser's (2017) discussion of cultural racism, which states that racial motives are imminently deniable. Racism is evident only in outcomes... Race has not declined in significance (Bowser, 2017, p.575). This passage demonstrates how racial stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of minority groups even when explicit racist intentions are denied.

The passage exposes the persistence of stereotypes associated with Native Americans, particularly the assumption that Indigenous people

are prone to alcoholism. Junior's statement that his grandmother is the rarest kind of Indian ironically reflects how deeply this stereotype has been normalized. Bowser (2017) explains that modern racism often becomes difficult to identify because racial motives can be denied while discriminatory assumptions continue to influence social perceptions. In this case, the stereotype functions as a form of cultural racism that simplifies and generalizes Indigenous identities. By highlighting his grandmother's behavior, the narrative challenges the stereotype and reveals how racialized assumptions shape the way minority groups are perceived in society.

The analysis further identifies individual racism as one of the forms of racism represented in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. According to Benjamin P. Bowser (2017), individual acts of racial hostility are socially produced rather than purely personal attitudes, because racial prejudice is learned through socialization processes within society. This concept explains that everyday interactions may reflect broader cultural assumptions about race that individuals internalize from their environment. Scholars also explain that individual or interpersonal racism refers to prejudice and discrimination carried out by individuals, either consciously or unconsciously, within everyday interactions between people (Conerly et al., 2021).

One representation of individual racism appears in the statement:

Most of the kids were my size or smaller, but there were ten or twelve monster dudes. Giant white guys. They looked like men, not boys. They had to be seniors. Some of them looked like they had to shave two or three times a day. They stared at me, the Indian boy with the black eye and swollen nose, my going-away gifts from Rowdy. Those white kids couldn't believe their eyes. They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO. (Alexie, 2007, p.63).

In this scene, Junior becomes the object of intense attention when he arrives at a predominantly White school. The students' reaction suggests that his presence is perceived as unusual or unfamiliar. This response reflects socially constructed perceptions about Native Americans that have been learned through cultural and social environments. When Junior is treated as

something strange or abnormal, it demonstrates how racial difference is interpreted through stereotypes that individuals absorb through socialization. Rather than seeing Junior as simply another student, the students' reactions position him as an outsider within the school community. This situation illustrates how everyday behavior can reproduce racial assumptions that have been normalized within society, reinforcing the perception of Indigenous identity as different from the dominant group (Bowser, 2017, p.574).

Another example appears in the statement:

Of course, after that little moment, I thought that Penelope and I would become closer. I thought that she'd start paying more attention to me and that everybody else would notice me then I'd become the most popular dude in the place. But nothing much changed. I was still a stranger in a strange land. And Penelope still treated me pretty much the same. She didn't really say much to me. And I didn't really say much to her. (Alexie, 2007, p.91).

This expression reflects Junior's emotional experience after entering a new social environment where he is surrounded primarily by White students. His feeling of alienation suggests that the attitudes and behaviors of others create a sense of social distance between him and the rest of the school community. Although the exclusion may not always be expressed through explicit hostility, subtle interactions can still reinforce racial boundaries. The sense of being a stranger indicates that Junior is treated as someone who does not fully belong in that environment. This situation demonstrates how socially learned perceptions about race influence everyday interpersonal relationships, producing feelings of isolation for minority individuals within dominant social spaces (Bowser, 2017, p.574). As scholars explain, everyday racial experiences often occur through routine social interactions that marginalize minority individuals and reinforce racial hierarchies (Essed, 1991).

A further representation of individual racism can be observed in the dialogue:

I walked into the school, made my way to the front office, and told them who I was.

"Oh, you're the one from the reservation," the secretary said.

"Yeah," I said.

I couldn't tell if she thought the reservation was a good or bad thing. (Alexie, 2007 p.66).

In this moment, the school secretary refers to Junior primarily through his background rather than recognizing him as an individual student. This form of labeling reduces his identity to a racialized category associated with Native American communities. Such categorization reflects how racial stereotypes can shape the way individuals perceive and describe minority groups. By identifying Junior through his connection to the reservation, the interaction emphasizes racial difference and reinforces social boundaries between Native and White communities. This example illustrates how everyday language can reproduce racial assumptions that individuals have internalized through socialization, thereby maintaining racial distinctions within social interactions (Bowser, 2017, p.574).

Another illustration appears in the statement:

Mr. P was crying.

I couldn't believe it.

I'd never seen a sober adult cry.

"But not you," Mr. P said. "You can't give up. You won't give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refuse to give up."

I didn't know what he was talking about. Or maybe I just didn't want to know. Jeez, it was a lot of pressure to put on a kid. I was carrying the burden of my race, you know? I was going to get a bad back from it. (Alexie, 2007, p.50).

Junior expresses the pressure he experiences as one of the few Native students in the school. Because of his visibility as a racial minority, he feels that his behavior may influence how others judge Native Americans as a whole. This situation reflects how racial stereotypes create expectations that minority individuals must represent their entire community. The pressure to disprove negative assumptions about one's racial group can create psychological stress and self-consciousness. Junior's statement therefore, demonstrates how

socially learned racial attitudes affect not only interactions between individuals but also the internal experiences of minority students within dominant social environments (Bowser, 2017, p.574).

Another representation appears in the statement:

Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn't pay well at all. (Alexie, 2007, p.130).

This statement reflects Junior's struggle to navigate two different social environments shaped by contrasting expectations about racial identity. At Reardan, he feels pressure to adapt to the norms of the dominant White culture in order to gain acceptance, while on the reservation, he sometimes feels that his connection to his Native identity is questioned. This tension illustrates how social perceptions about race influence the way individuals understand and negotiate their identity. Because racial meanings are shaped by social environments and cultural expectations, Junior experiences a sense of divided belonging between the two communities. This internal conflict demonstrates how racism not only appears in external behavior but also shapes how minority individuals perceive themselves within different social contexts (Bowser, 2017, p.574).

Together, these excerpts illustrate how individual racism operates through everyday interactions, language, and social expectations. The reactions of other students, the use of racial labeling, and the pressure placed on Junior to represent his entire community all reveal how racial attitudes are reproduced through socialization. In line with Bowser's (2017) theory, these examples demonstrate that individual racism does not originate solely from personal prejudice but is shaped by broader cultural assumptions about race that influence how people perceive and interact with others in daily life.

Finally, the analysis identifies institutional racism as another form of racism represented in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Bowser (2017) explains that institutional racism is

essential for both the perpetuation of White privilege and of White dominance. Institutional racism keeps racism going within and across generations. It, in turn, reinforces cultural racism (Bowser, 2017, p.581). The first representation of institutional racism appears in the statement:

Well, let me tell you. Agnes Adams is my mother. MY MOTHER! And Adams is her maiden name. So that means my mother was born an Adams and she was still an Adams when she wrote her name in that book. And she was thirty when she gave birth to me. Yep, so that means I was staring at a geometry book that was at least thirty years older than I was. I couldn't believe it. How horrible is that? My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world. (Alexie, 2007, p.36).

Junior explains that students on the reservation must use the same outdated textbooks that their parents once used, illustrating the lack of educational resources in Native schools. This fact demonstrates that unequal educational resources maintain racial inequality across generations, allowing structural disadvantages experienced by Native communities to persist. According to Better (2008, as cited in Soelistyarini et al., 2020), institutional racism has restricted equal access to educational opportunities, employment, and housing, as well as having an impact on the criminal justice system, further illustrating how systemic inequality affects marginalized communities.

The outdated textbooks symbolize the structural neglect experienced by Native communities within the educational system. According to Bowser (2017), institutional racism perpetuates racial inequality by distributing resources unevenly across racial groups. The fact that reservation students must use textbooks previously used by their parents indicates that educational institutions fail to invest in Indigenous schools, preventing improvements in learning conditions. This situation demonstrates how institutional racism operates across generations, as limited educational resources restrict the academic opportunities of Native students while better-funded schools in predominantly White communities continue to advance.

Second representation of institutional racism can be seen in the statement:

Nobody in my family had ever gone near a college. Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all of those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit. (Alexie, 2007, p.64).

Junior observes that Reardan High School has better facilities and opportunities than his reservation school. This disparity reflects Bowser's (2017) concept of institutional racism, which states that institutional racism is essential for both the perpetuation of White privilege and of White dominance... across generations. This concept illustrates how institutional inequalities in education provide advantages for White communities while maintaining structural disadvantages for Native students.

The contrast between Reardan High School and the reservation school illustrates how institutional racism structures educational inequality. Bowser (2017) argues that institutional racism maintains White privilege by allocating social resources in ways that advantage dominant racial groups. Reardan's superior facilities and opportunities demonstrate how predominantly White institutions receive greater investment, while reservation schools remain underfunded. This disparity reveals that the difference in educational quality is not simply accidental but reflects broader structural inequalities that maintain racial hierarchies in access to education.

Continue to the third representation of institutional racism which may be found in the statement:

It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it. Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor. (Alexie, 2007, p.17).

Junior reflects on the persistent poverty experienced by people living on the reservation.

This condition reflects Bowser's (2017) concept of institutional racism, which states that institutional racism is essential for both the perpetuation of White privilege and of White dominance. Institutional racism keeps racism going within and across generations. This concept demonstrates how structural inequalities maintain economic disadvantages for minority communities over time. The statement challenges the common cultural narrative that romanticizes poverty as a source of personal strength or resilience. In the context of Junior's experience on the reservation, poverty is presented as the result of long-standing structural inequality rather than individual failure. Bowser's (2017) concept of institutional racism explains that systemic barriers in education, employment, and resource distribution disproportionately disadvantage minority communities. The persistent poverty described in the novel, therefore, reflects the outcome of institutional structures that limit economic opportunities for Native Americans. By rejecting the idea that poverty builds character, the excerpt highlights how structural inequality produces hardship that cannot simply be overcome through individual effort.

Another instance of institutional racism was analyzed using Bowser's (2017) other passage. institutional racism is evident in the rejection of all institutional practices that constrain White supremacy in day-to-day life and in the lack of specifics as to what social and civil rights policies a Trump administration will pursue. (Bowser, 2017, p.586). Bowser (2017) explains that institutional racism operates through the everyday practices of institutions that unconsciously or deliberately maintain racial hierarchy and White dominance. It does not always appear through explicit racist policies, but through routine practices that disproportionately target racial minorities. In this context, institutional racism manifests through law enforcement practices that normalize racial profiling. The act of pulling someone over for driving while Indian reflects how policing institutions may reproduce racial bias in their daily operations. According to Bowser (2017), institutional racism works subtly through established systems, allowing discriminatory outcomes to occur even without openly racist intentions. In the novel we found that:

Reardan is the rich, white farm town that sits in the wheat fields exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez. And it is a hick town, I suppose, filled with farmers and rednecks and racist cops who stop every Indian that drives through. During one week when I was little, Dad got stopped three times for DWI: Driving While Indian. (Alexie, 2007, p.53).

The police profiling of Junior's father shows how law enforcement practices target Native Americans. According to Bowser (2017), institutional racism operates through authority structures that treat racial minorities unfairly, reinforcing social control and inequality. This occurrence demonstrates how racism operates through routine institutional practices rather than explicit racist policies. The phrase driving while Indian implies that Junior's father becomes a target of police surveillance solely because of his racial identity, illustrating racial profiling embedded within routine policing practices. Such experiences play a part in what scholars describe as legal cynicism, a cultural frame in which marginalized communities consider law enforcement institutions as illegitimate, biased, or unresponsive due to repeated discriminatory encounters (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). When individuals are frequently stopped or monitored based on racial identity, trust in legal institutions erodes, reinforcing the perception that the justice system operates unevenly across racial groups. In this context, the repeated targeting of Junior's father demonstrates how institutional racism functions through everyday policing practices that normalize suspicion toward Native Americans. This portrayal in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie reveals how racial profiling not only reflects institutional bias but also contributes to broader patterns of mistrust between marginalized communities and the legal system.

Bowser's (2017) concept of institutional racism explains that racial inequality is often reproduced through everyday institutional procedures that disproportionately affect minority groups. In this case, the act of pulling Junior's father over reflects racial profiling embedded within law enforcement practices. Research on racial disparities in the criminal justice system also suggests that racial identity can shape officers' responses during encounters, as race and

aggressive behavior may have combined to more strongly influence the use of force (McNeeley, 2021, p.20). This perspective supports the idea that racial bias may influence law enforcement decisions even in routine interactions. Therefore, the occurrence illustrates how institutional authority reinforces racial hierarchy by treating Native identity as inherently suspicious, revealing how institutional racism functions through ordinary policing behavior.

The last institutional racism was analyzed using another of Bowser's (2017) passages, Institutional racism precedes and preconditions individual expressions of racism. Cultural racism is also a necessary precondition to individual racism, but its influence is mediated through institutional. (Bowser, 2017, p.581). Bowser (2017) explains that individual racism is influenced by both institutional and cultural forces. Cultural racism establishes the ideological foundation that legitimizes racial hierarchy, while institutions reinforce these beliefs through structural inequality. The portrayal of Reardan as a wealthy and successful White town reflects how institutions concentrate resources within dominant racial groups. According to Bowser (2017), these structural inequalities shape individual attitudes, reinforcing the perception that White communities are inherently more successful. It was implied in the novel that:

Reardan is the rich, white farm town that sits in the wheat fields exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez. The kids in Reardan are the smartest and most athletic kids anywhere. (Alexie, 2007, p.53).

Junior describes the stark economic contrast between the wealthy White town of Reardan and the impoverished reservation community. This contrast reflects Bowser's (2017) concept of institutional racism, which explains that institutional racism precedes and preconditions individual expressions of racism. This concept indicates that structural inequalities between communities create the conditions that reinforce racial disparities in opportunity and resources.

Junior's description of Reardan as a prosperous and predominantly White community contrasts sharply with the poverty of the reservation, emphasizing the structural inequality

between the two environments. Bowser (2017) argues that institutional racism operates by concentrating social resources and opportunities within dominant racial groups while marginalizing minority communities. The economic and educational advantages present in Reardan demonstrate how institutions distribute resources unevenly, resulting in significant disparities in opportunity. These structural differences may also reinforce cultural beliefs that White communities are inherently more successful, even though such success is largely produced by institutional advantages rather than individual superiority.

The representation of racism in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie demonstrates that institutional, cultural, and individual racism are interconnected rather than isolated phenomena. Institutional racism establishes structural inequalities, such as the unequal distribution of educational resources between the reservation and Reardan. These institutional conditions are reinforced by cultural racism, which produces stereotypes and social beliefs that portray Indigenous communities as inferior or less capable. Such cultural narratives then influence individual attitudes and behaviors, leading to interpersonal discrimination experienced by Native American characters. In this way, institutional structures, cultural beliefs, and individual actions operate together to sustain racial hierarchies and reproduce inequality within the social environment depicted in the novel.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of racism in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie through the analytical framework of racism theory proposed by Benjamin P. Bowser (2017). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research analyzed textual evidence from the novel to explore how racism is represented through narrative events, character interactions, and social environments experienced by the protagonist, Arnold Spirit Jr. The findings demonstrate that racism in the novel operates through interconnected dimensions that include individual racism, cultural racism, and institutional racism. These forms of racism

function simultaneously and reinforce one another, shaping the social conditions, opportunities, and identity formation of the protagonist as he navigates life between the Spokane Indian Reservation and a predominantly white school in Reardan.

The first important finding of this study is that racism in the novel appears clearly through interpersonal interactions that reflect individual racism. Individual racism manifests through everyday encounters between characters in which prejudice, stereotyping, and discriminatory assumptions influence social behavior. Throughout the narrative, Arnold Spirit Jr. frequently experiences reactions that mark him as different or inferior because of his Native American identity. The way other students observe him as unusual or unfamiliar when he first arrives at Reardan High School illustrates how racial difference is constructed within social interactions. These reactions demonstrate how racial attitudes are socially learned and reproduced within everyday environments.

From the perspective of Bowser's (2017) theory, such interactions reveal that individual racism does not emerge solely from personal hostility but rather from broader cultural and social frameworks that shape how individuals perceive racial groups. The reactions of students and staff toward Junior illustrate how racial assumptions become normalized within social environments. As a result, Junior often experiences feelings of alienation and social distance within the predominantly white school environment. These experiences demonstrate how individual racism can operate subtly through ordinary interactions that reinforce racial boundaries and social hierarchies.

The second significant finding concerns the representation of cultural racism within the novel. Cultural racism operates through shared social beliefs, stereotypes, and symbolic representations that portray certain racial groups as inferior while positioning others as the dominant cultural norm. In the context of the novel, Native American identity is frequently associated with poverty, limited opportunities, and cultural marginalization. These assumptions reflect broader cultural narratives that frame Indigenous

communities as disadvantaged spaces lacking progress or success.

Through Junior's reflections about the reservation, the narrative reveals how cultural racism shapes perceptions about place, identity, and opportunity. The idea that hope increases the farther one moves away from the reservation illustrates how Indigenous spaces are culturally constructed as environments of limitation and hopelessness. Such representations reflect the ideological function of cultural racism described by Bowser (2017), in which dominant cultural narratives establish assumptions about racial hierarchy and influence how institutions and individuals interpret social realities.

Cultural racism is also represented through stereotypes that simplify and generalize Indigenous identity. For example, the stereotype that Native Americans are commonly associated with alcoholism reflects how racialized assumptions persist within cultural discourse. The novel challenges these stereotypes by highlighting characters whose experiences contradict these simplified representations. By exposing the gap between stereotype and reality, the narrative illustrates how cultural racism distorts the perception of marginalized communities and reduces complex identities into narrow and often negative portrayals.

Another key dimension of cultural racism highlighted in the novel is the symbolic representation of Native American identity within institutional spaces. The presence of a Native American mascot at Reardan High School, while Junior remains the only Native student reflects a contradiction between symbolic inclusion and actual representation. Indigenous identity becomes a symbol used for cultural imagery, while Indigenous individuals themselves remain marginalized within institutional environments. This dynamic illustrates how cultural racism can operate through symbols and narratives that reinforce racial hierarchy even when explicit discrimination is not present.

The third major finding of this research relates to the representation of institutional racism within the novel. Institutional racism refers to the ways in which social systems and institutions reproduce racial inequality through structural arrangements, policies, and resource distribution.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, institutional racism is most clearly illustrated through disparities in educational resources and social opportunities between the reservation and the predominantly white community of Reardan.

The condition of the reservation school reflects systemic neglect and underinvestment in Indigenous educational institutions. Junior's observation that students on the reservation must use outdated textbooks previously used by earlier generations highlights the persistent lack of educational resources in Native American communities. This situation demonstrates how institutional inequality can perpetuate disadvantage across generations, limiting opportunities for academic development and social mobility.

In contrast, Reardan High School provides significantly better facilities, updated learning materials, and broader opportunities for students. This disparity illustrates how institutional systems allocate resources unevenly across racial communities. From Bowser's (2017) perspective, such inequalities demonstrate how institutional racism maintains racial hierarchy by providing advantages to dominant groups while restricting opportunities for marginalized populations. The difference between the two schools, therefore, represents not merely an educational gap but a broader structural inequality embedded within social institutions.

Institutional racism in the novel is also reflected in the economic conditions experienced by Native American communities. The persistent poverty on the reservation highlights how historical and structural inequalities shape economic opportunities. Rather than portraying poverty as a result of individual failure, the narrative suggests that these conditions are linked to broader institutional systems that limit access to resources and opportunities for Indigenous communities. This representation emphasizes that racial inequality often operates through systemic mechanisms rather than solely through individual prejudice.

Another representation of institutional racism appears in law enforcement practices depicted in the novel. The experience of Junior's father being stopped by police for driving while Indian illustrates how racial profiling can occur

within routine institutional procedures. This event demonstrates how authority structures may reproduce racial bias through everyday practices, reinforcing patterns of discrimination even when explicit racist intentions are not openly acknowledged. Such examples highlight how institutional racism functions through established systems that shape the experiences of minority communities within society.

Beyond identifying the forms of racism represented in the novel, this research also reveals how racism significantly influences Junior's identity formation and psychological experiences. As a Native American teenager navigating two contrasting social environments, Junior faces the challenge of negotiating his sense of belonging. Within the reservation community, his decision to attend a white-dominated school leads some members of his community to perceive him as abandoning his cultural roots. Meanwhile, in Reardan, he experiences prejudice and stereotypes because of his Native American identity.

The dual marginalization places Junior in a complex position where he feels partially disconnected from both communities. His statement that he is half Indian in one place and half white in the other reflects the internal conflict created by navigating multiple cultural expectations. The novel, therefore, illustrates how racism not only affects social opportunities but also shapes how individuals perceive themselves and their identity within society.

Despite these challenges, the narrative also portrays Junior's resilience and determination to pursue a better future. His decision to seek educational opportunities outside the reservation represents an act of resistance against the structural limitations imposed by racial inequality. Through his perseverance and self-awareness, Junior gradually develops a sense of agency that allows him to challenge stereotypes and redefine his identity beyond the constraints imposed by societal expectations.

From a broader perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of literature as a medium for examining social realities and exposing systemic inequality. Literary narratives provide a space where complex social issues such as racism can be explored through character experiences and storytelling. Through Junior's

journey, the novel reveals how racial inequality affects everyday life, shaping educational opportunities, social relationships, and personal identity.

The analysis also reinforces the argument that racism should be understood as a multidimensional system rather than simply an individual attitude. The interaction between individual, cultural, and institutional racism demonstrates how these forms of discrimination reinforce one another to maintain racial hierarchies. Individual prejudice is often influenced by cultural stereotypes, while institutional structures may reproduce inequalities that reflect these cultural assumptions. Understanding racism as an interconnected system is therefore essential for addressing its persistence within contemporary societies.

This research also has several broader implications for discussions about race, education, and social inequality. The novel highlights how disparities in educational resources contribute to unequal opportunities for marginalized communities. Access to quality education plays a crucial role in shaping future possibilities, and unequal investment in educational institutions can reinforce long-term social inequality. The contrast between the reservation school and Reardan High School, therefore, illustrates how structural inequalities can influence educational outcomes and life trajectories.

Although this study provides important insights into the representation of racism within the novel, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses primarily on a single literary work, which means that the findings cannot fully represent the diverse experiences of Native American communities across different historical and cultural contexts. Additionally, literary interpretation is influenced by the researcher's analytical perspective, meaning that alternative interpretations of the text may also exist.

Future research could expand this study by examining other literary works that address Native American identity and racial inequality. Comparative analyses between Indigenous literature and other minority narratives could provide a broader understanding of how racism is represented across different cultural contexts. Further studies may also explore intersections

between racism, poverty, gender, and cultural identity in order to gain deeper insight into the complexity of social inequality within literary narratives.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* portrays racism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that operates through individual interactions, cultural narratives, and institutional structures. Through the experiences of Arnold Spirit Jr., the novel reveals how racial inequality shapes educational opportunities, identity formation, and social relationships. By highlighting both the challenges and resilience of the protagonist, the narrative encourages readers to critically reflect on the persistence of racial inequality and the importance of addressing structural discrimination within society.

Ultimately, the analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary literature represents racial inequality and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. By examining racism through multiple analytical dimensions, this study underscores the importance of recognizing racism as a systemic issue that continues to shape social structures and individual lives. Literature, therefore, remains an essential medium for exploring social injustice and encouraging critical awareness of racial inequality in modern societies.

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