

**The Unhomeliness Dilemma of Cultural Identity
on Sherman Alexie's Short Story *War Dances***

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Abstract

Sherman Alexie's (2009) *War Dances*, one of the short stories in the anthology *War Dances*, portrays the complexities of Native American identity in contemporary American society. The issue lies in how Indigenous subjects negotiate their cultural belonging through the continuing presence of colonial histories and the supremacy of American cultural values. The narrative presents various social phenomena and catastrophes marked by uncertainty, isolation, and displacement. The contour suggests that cultural identity cannot be comprehended as a settled and homogeneous category, but rather as a negotiated process. This study examines the representation of unhomeliness as a cultural identity dilemma for Native Americans, employing Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and unhomeliness. His concept of hybridity provides a framework for an in-between cultural space that leads to mimicry as a process of adoption and negotiation between social and cultural entities within the realm of assimilation, accompanied by the potential for ambivalence. These circumstances culminate in unhomeliness, considered not merely as physical displacement but also as a psychological and cultural condition in which the subject experiences a disrupted sense of belonging. The study argues that *War Dances* portrays unhomeliness as a persistent dilemma in Native American cultural identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial history is the starting point for scrutinizing Native American life and culture. As tribal individuals, Native Americans have diverse histories, languages, traditions, and cultural practices across North America. The discussion is divided into distinct sections regarding Native Americans' self and identity. Their first migration was approximately 23,000 BC, via an ice-land expedition that passed through the Bering Strait, which used to be a land before global warming hit our Earth. Before European settlement, the lives of Indigenous people were recorded systematically and structured by established traditional and tribal

customs. They were characterized as harmonious and balanced in their connection to nature and land. Native Americans adequately fulfill their roles in nurturing and perpetuating the lives of all living things on Earth. Land is not just a geographical contour where they live, but also a home, community, ancestral territory, spiritual space, source of livelihood, and cultural identity.

During European arrival and colonization, major developments occurred, including European exploration, expansion of colonial territories, settlement, land dispossession, warfare, disease, and Christianization. It had an impact on Native Americans' lives from the Indigenous majority to the political minority. They had to deal with

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displacement, assimilation, population loss due to genocide, and ethnic cleansing designed by the colonizer. The doctrine of discovery in a New World or the Wilderness of America indicates a missed recognition of the prior existence of Native Americans.

The researcher portrays the catastrophe in three main points: the broken treaties, the Indian Removal Act, and the reservation system. The U.S. government entered numerous treaties with Native Nations addressing territories, sovereignty, trade, peace, and political relationships. However, many treaties were later violated or undermined. Meanwhile, in 1830, the Indian Removal Act was passed as a forced removal of Native peoples, particularly the Cherokee. This act has become an important symbol of U.S. Indian removal policy, covering forced removal, loss of ancestral lands, relocation to designated territories, and human suffering. The last form of colonial catastrophe was in the reservation system. An Indian reservation is a specific area of land in the United States managed and governed by a federally recognized Native American tribal nation (Day, 2023). Reservations were created through treaties, federal policies, land allotment, and political pressure.

As a consequence of colonization, assimilation is the main issue in Native Americans' lives. Green (2007) views assimilation not as an organic cultural blending, but more as an aggressive, gendered mechanism of state-sponsored colonialism designed to eliminate Indigenous political authority and seize Indigenous land. The U.S. government attempted to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society. The contour and circumstance are considered the ultimate research problem, as represented in Sherman Alexie's short story *War Dances* (2009). As a matter of fact, assimilation can historically be seen through the boarding school system. It led to several catastrophes, such as the suppression of Indigenous languages, the suppression of cultural practices, changes to family structure, Christianization, the naming system, demeanor, and cultural identity.

War Dances (2009) is a short-story anthology written by Sherman Alexie. The narration is real and complex, depicting the life of an ordinary Spokane Native American. The story took place in Seattle, creating a modern, urban,

and deeply personal ambiance for the main character as an unnamed narrator. The researcher identifies prominent issues in the narration as a causal effect of colonial assimilation. However, the existence of assimilation is not portrayed in a complete awareness from the character's point of view. The research problems from the narration are elucidated as follows.

Generational trauma is portrayed as a prominent issue at the beginning of the narrative development.

My father, an alcoholic, diabetic Indian with terminally damaged kidneys had just endured an incredibly expensive surgery for what? (Alexie, 2009).

The excerpt highlights the circumstances of a destructive modern life of Native Americans under the influence of alcohol due to the impact of White assimilation. Traditionally, alcoholism was not part of tribal customs nor tribal practices in daily life. It is depicted as an agenda to destroy the social system of Native Americans and deteriorate their health. The condition itself is a form of trauma perceived from generation to generation.

In continuation of the first oppression, the researcher has found discrimination against Native American individuals in the portrayal of healthcare professionals' manner.

"My father is cold," I said. "Can I get another blanket?"

The nurse glanced up from her paperwork and regarded me. Her expression was neither compassionate nor callous.

"How can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"I'd like another blanket for my father. He's cold."

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir."

She looked back down at her paperwork. She made a few notes. Not knowing what else to do, I stood there and waited.

"Sir," the nurse said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

She was irritated. I understood. After all, how many thousands of times had she been asked for an extra blanket? She was a nurse, an educated woman, not a damn housekeeper. And it was never really about an extra blanket, was it? No, when people asked for an extra blanket they were asking for a time machine (Alexie, 2009).

The prejudice in that unfair treatment left confusion. As a minority, Native Americans will

always be taken into account as a second-level society. Furthermore, the situation is degraded by the portrayal minority against minority on the excerpt, as the representation of healthcare is that of an African American.

I walked down the hallway - the recovery hallway - to the nurses' station. There were three women nurses there, two white and one black. I am Native American - Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indian - and I thought my darker pigment might give me an edge with the black nurse, so I addressed her directly (Alexie, 2009).

The narration elaborates the complexity of Native American minority status and position, as the discrimination is not only imposed by White as an old-schooled paradigm, but also by the minority's fellow.

The ultimate issue is the Native American crisis of modern Native identity. The sense of always being in between raises many questions and curiosity about who the Native American, as represented by the narrator really is. The depiction of modernity through technology and digitization, as well as the popular culture of American life, contributes to an identity crisis with a distant connection to traditionality and nature.

The researcher contemplated the social catastrophes explained above as a research problem in conducting a research entitled *The Unhomeliness Dilemma of Cultural Identity on Sherman Alexie's Short Story War Dances*. Postcolonialism by Homi K. Bhabha is employed as a paradigm to analyze the problems. In detail, the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and ultimately unhomeliness are used to break the narration down into a core discovery.

METHODS

The methodology of this study is a text-based, qualitative study employing Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts as the formal object and theoretical framework. Several considerations, such as the use of non-numeric data, an inductive approach, and a holistic examination, guide the methodology. In the data collection, the researcher uses the short story *War Dances* (2009) as the material object and a primary source of data. Certain books, academic articles, and source texts

related to Native Americans and internal colonization toward them are used as secondary data.

In the data analysis, the researcher employs several concepts accordingly. The portrayal of hybridity in the narrative is taken as an initial step. The circumstance is analyzed through several parts of assimilation which take place in Native Americans' lives. Bhabha (2004) defines hybridity as a cross-cultural mixing that happens in the "Third Space" during colonial encounters, breaking down rigid ideas of pure or fixed cultures. The core ideas of hybridity consist of the third space, rejection of binaries, and subversion of authority. Next, the formation of mimicry is examined in detail as the process where colonized people copy the language, dress, behavior, and values of the colonizer, resulting in a performance that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 2004). In this step, the manifestation of ambivalence is also scrutinized, as menace and subversion occur during the mimicry stage. Eventually, the sense of unhomeliness is questioned and analyzed as the ultimate research finding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hybridity

Alcoholism

Through internal colonization of White supremacy, Native Americans' lives are associated with a life and culture of White Americans, in addition to being associated with other minority groups. The form of hybridity can be seen in the beginning of the narrative's construction, which imposed the existence of alcoholism among Native Americans.

My father, an alcoholic diabetic Indian with terminally damaged kidneys, had just endured an incredibly expensive surgery for what? (Alexie, 2009).

The utterance is followed by the conversation below,

"What the hell you doing here, anyway?"

"My dad just got his feet cut off," I said
"Diabetes?"

"And vodka."

"Vodka straight up or with a nostalgia

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chaser?"
 "Both."
 "Natural causes for Indian."
 "Yep." (Alexie, 2009).

Lakomäki et.al. (2017) argue that these parallel but divergent colonial laws throw into stark relief the intimate inter-linkages between alcohol, colonial state-building, and political and cultural constructions of Indigenous status and Native spaces. They add that scholars have long recognized alcohol as a "colonizing substance par excellence." However, while earlier studies saw liquor simply as "a particularly versatile weapon in the invader's arsenal," more recent research apprehends alcohol's roles in colonialism as far more "complex and even contradictory." In particular, during the past twenty years, scholarly interest has expanded from alcohol's effects on Indigenous health and well-being to the politics of alcohol in colonial situations. The narrative of alcoholism in *War Dances* is inferred with a depth of curiosity as depicted (Alexie, 2009),

"True or False: When a reservation-raised Native American dies of alcoholism, it should be considered death by natural causes."

Alcoholism is viewed not only as a matter of a health issue, but further as the destruction of a tribal system that is harmonious and balanced into massive catastrophes of abuse and the enforcement of substances. This circumstance is the real depiction of the manifestation of hybridity through assimilation policy controlled in a reservation system.

Minority Status

The praxis of hybridity occurs in the day-to-day life of Native Americans. The contour led to the emergence of ethnic status among the minority group. The divergent status takes shape in relation to the historical background of minorities. Locke and Stern state,

The literature of and about a minority group maybe regarded from three approaches: as a reflection of the minority mind; as an index of the majority attitude toward the minority; and as a social mirror reflecting the interaction of the majority - minority relationships, with their ever changing alignment (Locke, 1946, pp. 315-316).

The researcher portrays the phenomena into two distinctive situation. The term minority against minority is depicted in the narration as the main character receiving a mistreatment from the healthcare professional who comes to be an African American.

I am Native American - Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indian - and I thought my darker pigment might give me an edge with the black nurse, so I addressed her directly."

"My father is cold," I said. "Can I get another blanket?" (Alexie, 2009).

The nurse glanced up from her paperwork and regarded me. Her expression was neither compassionate nor callous.

"How can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"I'd like another blanket for my father. He's cold."

"I'll be with you in a moment, sir."

She looked back down at her paperwork. She made a few notes. Not knowing what else to do, I stood there and waited.

"Sir," the nurse said. "I'll be with you in a moment." (Alexie, 2009).

The researcher views the situation as two main problems: a healthcare negligence due to being Native American and a marginalization by fellow minorities. In the old-school assumption, racism and marginalization are acts of discrimination held merely by White supremacy. As academics, we barely see through what is going on between minority groups. As if separated by an unseen wall, those social groups do not interact. In *War Dances* (Alexie, 2009), the situation is clearly described as humiliating for Native Americans.

The interaction minority-on-minority taking shape as hybridity is also found in the consumption of Chinese food, Wonton.

Ah, man, I love Trader Joe's. But you know what's bad about them? You fall in love with something they have - they stock it for a year - and then it just disappears. They had those wontons I loved, and now they don't. I was willing to shop for you and the boys, but I don't want anything for me. I'm on a one-man hunger strike against them (Alexie, 2009).

The next narration on minority status is dated back to the setting of World War II. The relation of power and status is explicated

throughout White, Native American, and African American communities in conformity.

Yeah, nowadays I suppose it isn't a good thing to call an Indian Chief, but back then it was what we did. I served with a few Indians. They didn't segregate them Indians, you know, not like the black boys. I know you aren't supposed to call them boys anymore, but they were boys. All of us were boys, I guess. But the thing is, those Indian boys lived and slept and ate with us white boys. They were right there with us. But, anyway, we called all them Indians Chief. I bet you've been called Chief a few times yourself (Alexie, 2009).

The excerpt above presents the dynamics and complexity of Native Americans as a minority group. As African Americans were segregated within the assumption of racism through the slavery system, Native Americans were still considered higher in status. It examines how Native Americans' values are perceived in the White society; however, the ideal condition is egalitarianism.

Tradition vs Modernity

Tradition is prominent and integral to Native Americans' lives and their cultural identity. It is a form of resistance to voice their existence and status. As the root of Native Americans' identity, traditional practices are articulated in the narrative below,

Five minutes later, carrying a Pedleton Star blanket, the Indian man walked out of his sister's hospital room, accompanied by his father, who wore Levi's, a black T-shirt, and eagle feathers in his gray braids (Alexie, 2009).

The figurative demeanor in the excerpt is a blend of what the researcher terms tradition and modernity, as reflected in the eagle feather and braids, which serve as symbols of Native American traditions and customs. Meanwhile, Levi's and a black T-shirt tend to represent modern wear among White Americans. The hybridity matches well as a representation of modern Native Americans.

The portrayal of tradition in the modern era was also elucidated in the practice of baby naming, as follows.

"I don't even want to be here," the other

Indian said. "But my dad started, like, this new Indian tradition. He says it's a thousand years old. But that's bullshit. He just made it up to impress himself. And the whole family goes along with it, even when we know it's bullshit. He's in the delivery room waving eagle feather around. Jesus."

"What's the tradition?"

"Oh, he does a naming ceremony right in the hospital. It's supposed to protect the baby from all the technology and shit. Like hospitals are the big problem." (Alexie, 2009).

The researcher views the conversational ambiance as foreign to the naming ceremony. Researcher infers an estranged relationship between Native Americans and their traditional customs and practices. It is widely assumed to result from hybridity and predominantly occurs within the reservation or boarding school system. The tone of mockery and skepticism from Native Americans in the naming ceremony depicted on the citation indicates how far the roots of tradition have been degraded through the ages.

Christianity

The last form of hybridity is captured in the praxis of religious belief. Native Americans, in the traditional term, follow paganism as their belief system. They form a harmonious transcendental connection to nature. This belief had been passed through generations and marked as Native American ideology and cultural identity. Conversely, the assimilation agenda transforms the system of belief into the Abrahamic religion of Christianity. Sharpe (2013, p. 101) states, "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. government sponsored separate boarding schools for Indians with the aim of Christianization and assimilation. Young Indians were forbidden to use the Indigenous language or to learn Indian cultures and practices."

The overview can be seen through the linguistic choices, such as,

He's in the delivery room waving eagle feathers around. Jesus (Alexie, 2009).

In addition to it,

Jesus, who'd ever heard of a self-aware fundamentalist? The son, perhaps not the unbeliever he'd pretended to be, sang backup as his father launched into a radio friendly honor

song, just three and a half minutes, like any Top Forty rock song of the past fifty years (Alexie, 2009).

The occurrence of Christianity as a religion justifies the realm of hybridity in Native Americans' colonial manifestation, as well as the distant perspective from the traditional belief system due to suppression from White supremacy.

The suppression of religion is signaled in the narration as,

Your son has often made the joke that you were the only Indian of your generation who went to Catholic school on purpose. This is, of course, a tasteless joke that makes light of the forced incarceration and subsequent physical, spiritual, cultural, and sexual abuse of tens of thousands of Native American children in Catholic and Protestant boarding schools (Alexie, 2009).

Eventually, the narrative is called off by depicting the final moment of the life of Native Americans still within the element of Christianity,

We buried my father in the tiny Catholic cemetery on our reservation. Since I am named after him, I had to stare at a tombstone with my name on it. (Alexie, 2009)

Furthermore, a detailed scrutiny of the excerpt above shows that the Catholic cemetery is located within the reservation area, which is designed as a legal area for Native Americans to perform and practice their traditional customs and regulations, including the funeral ceremony.

Mimicry and Ambivalence

According to Bhabha's *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1994, p.86), mimicry is the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as 'almost the same, but not quite'. The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, and its difference. The production of mimicry and its ambivalence can be seen throughout linguistic basis on a naming system, lifestyle, academic agenda, and even the deployment of military service as narrated

"I had a cousin who served as a cook in the Gulf War, in 1990; I had another cousin who served in the Vietnam War as a cook; and my

father's father, Adolph, served in the Second World War and was killed in action on Okinawa, on April 5, 1945." (Alexie, 2009).

Westernized names are increasingly chosen as a result of assimilation, as depicted.

Adolph. It's hard to forget a name like that. An Indian named Adolph, and there was that Nazi bastard named Adolph. Your grandfather caught plenty of grief over that. But we mostly called him Chief. Did you know that? (Alexie, 2009).

The disappearance of the traditional naming convention is categorized as a political consequence in Native American society.

In the subsequent mode of mimicry production, the researcher views the American lifestyle as one of the tenets.

After I got home with yogurt and turkey dogs and Cinnamon Toast Crunch and my brother-in-law left, I watched George Romero's "Diary of the Dead", and laughed at myself for choosing a movie that featured dozens of zombies getting shot in the head (Alexie, 2009).

It is obvious how the Native American represented by the main narrator leads his life through a White American lifestyle of yogurt, turkey dogs, and Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

Furthermore, the depiction of mimicry is also portrayed on

The Indian world is filled with charlatans, men and women who pretend - hell, who might have come to believe - that they are holy. The year before, I went to a lecture at the University of Washington. An elderly Indian woman, a scholar, had come to orate on Indian sovereignty and literature. She kept arguing for some kind of separate indigenous literary identity, which was ironic considering that she was speaking English to a room full of white professor. But I wasn't angry with the woman, or even bored. No, I felt sorry for her. I realized that she was dying of nostalgia. She had taken nostalgia as her false idol - her thing blanket - and it was murdering her (Alexie, 2009).

A female Native American appropriates White academic constitution to voice her existence and advocate indigeneity. Conversely, ambiguity arises when the elements employed are categorized as White. Meanwhile, the core voice is on Native

Americans' concerns. Furthermore, the narrator labels the situation as nostalgia, which is considered strange and as if unreal.

Unhomeliness Dilemma

Bhabha's (1994) concept of unhomeliness examines a profound psychological, cultural, and existential state of displacement in which the domestic and public spheres collide, rendering the familiar strangely alien to minority groups. Native Americans, as a marginalized social group, manifest an acute structural dilemma through generational living. They lost their sense of belonging in either of the two domains, of tradition or White civilization. In *War Dances* (2009), the depiction occurs solely through the main character and narrator. The sense of traditional belonging was experienced as compelling, fulfilling the need for belonging.

The first portrayal can be examined in the narrative of *Blanket* as Native American cultural belonging.

"My dad, he's in the recovery room," I said. "Well, it's more like a hallway, and he's freezing, and they've only got these shitty little blankets, and I came looking for Indians in the hospital because I figured - well, I guessed if I found any Indians they might have some good blankets." (Alexie, 2009).

The excerpt highlights blanket as an imperative culture. Native American blankets signify the intrinsic cultural and spiritual significance of Indigenous Americans (Tula, 2024). There is great honor and humility embedded in the blanket design and color choices, which represent the spiritual connection to Mother Earth. Native American blankets represent resilience, identity, and spirituality. They elaborate distinctive designs and symbolism deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions and beliefs.

In contrast, while a blanket is viewed as a sense of belonging and identity, a foreign feeling takes shape in the opposite, as narrated below.

"That is your father's song," the old man said when he finished. "I give it to him. I will never sing it again. It belongs to your father now."

Behind his back, the old man's son rolled his eyes and walked into his sister's room.

"O.K., thank you," I said. I felt like an ass, accepting the blanket and the old man's good wishes, and silently mocking them at the same

time. But maybe the old man did have some power, some real medicine, because he peeked into my brain (Alexie, 2009).

The mockery symbolizes alienation toward traditional practices and customs. The main character is unsure whether to believe in the healing song. The practices turn into an abstract superstition in the modern era.

The second portrayal of unhomeliness sense is seen on the psychological side of grief. The death of the main character's father brings a crisis of belonging, a true feeling of a rooted cultural identity. After his father's death, the urgency to find and trace back familial memory intensifies in the main character. He traced how his grandfather died while serving in World War II and learned what his grandfather's life was like.

There is an expectation that tradition or a heroic act be considered as familial memory to justify the sense of belonging. However, the narrative is articulated as a normal death.

No, it's just - with your book and everything, I know you want something big here. I know you want something big from your grandfather. I know you are hoping he said something huge and poetic, and, honestly, I was thinking about lying to you. I was thinking about making up something as beautiful as I could. Something about love and forgiveness and courage and all that. But I couldn't think of anything good enough. And I didn't want to lie to you. So I have to be honest and say that your grandfather didn't say anything. He just died there in the sand. In silence (Alexie, 2009).

The familial connection is not entirely established through a trace-back. The impasse led the main character to leap into the unknown, transient realm.

In addition, the grief itself lies in the main character's episode of facing death due to a health issue. Luthfia (2019) states that, (1) Perspective on death through Native Americans lens considered as a tame death; (2) Death additionally scrutinized as social balance mechanism according to Native American value; At last, (3) Funeral protocols performed in tribal system essentially expounds the resistance of Native American people against the assimilation and White domination.

Even though death is traditionally considered a natural occurrence, the scene in the

narration intensifies the main character's existential crisis.

We made love. We fell asleep. But, agitated by the steroids, I woke at 2, 3, 4, and 5 A.M. The bed was killing my back, so I lay flat on the floor. I wasn't going to die anytime soon, at least not because of my little friend Tumor, but that didn't make me feel any more comfortable or comforted. I felt distant from the world - from my wife and my sons, from my mother and my siblings, from all my friends. I felt closest to those who'd always had fingers in their brains (Alexie, 2009).

The unhomeliness of cultural identity is considered a crisis of home to the main character as the representation of the Native American generation. The colonial structure exacerbates the dilemma of belonging. Furthermore, the death-facing circumstance deepens the sense of being in between. As a consequence of the historical and cultural catastrophes that have occurred, Native Americans uproot their identity through the enforcement of the colonial agenda and the suppression of their cultural identity. The awareness of unhomeliness in the end of the narrative crucially justifies Bhabha's synthesis of the spatial critics.

CONCLUSION

The dilemma of unhomeliness navigates the cultural identity of Native Americans, specifically for the new generation. The researcher underscores the preservation, nurturing, and perpetuation of Native American tradition as central to articulating their cultural identity and self-determination. As elucidated in detail, this phenomenon focuses on the colonial manifestation. The degradation of the sense toward the root of their cultural identity as a result of colonial assimilation signals the emergence of a transient realm for the Native Americans. The in-between feeling, or unhomeliness, is the ultimate catastrophe for Native Americans.

The researcher raised concerns about the repetitive discussion from the perspective of postcolonialism on Native American authors, such as Sherman Alexie. This circumstance led to a realization of how catastrophic it has been that this

problem is still ongoing at the moment, and has always been discussed. The articulation, determination, or anti-colonial manifestation are portrayed interminably through literature and the arts. This short story, *War Dances*, is also considered an attempt to identify the cultural identity of Native Americans. However, the researcher declares that self-determination or self-identity among Native Americans cannot be shaped smoothly.

In this case, the cultural identity of Native Americans cannot be distinguished as black and white. The assimilation process led to a hybrid identity that intersects between entities of culture and tradition. The situation is widely assumed to be influenced by the postmodernism paradox, in which indigeneity itself is being questioned. This phenomenon ultimately led to the realm of the unhomeliness dilemma..

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