

## Through the Bakhtinian Lens: Re-Trooping the Narratives in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*

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### Abstract

The paper takes up Bakhtinian Dialogism and its aspect of Polyphony, Heteroglossia, chronotype and Carnavalesque and uses these to interrogate the underlying narratological texture of Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*. The paper argues that very skillfully, Alexie has woven these Bakhtinian essentials into this novel which typifies the Native American Indian's quest for avenging himself. As Alexie furthers his quest, he moves into different time zones and space zones to recreate the 'Raisondetre' or the purpose for being. The Bakhtinian Dialogic is a critical framework that can deconstruct Alexie's narrativization very accurately as it helps in seeing through the layers of meanings and signifiers in encapsulates.

### Keywords: Carnavalesque, Chronotope, Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Polyphony

The paper hypothesizes that Sherman Alexie's works in general and *Indian Killer* in particular is a dialogic text that opens up a conversation between 'now' and 'then', between an inherited past and a living present. The dedication that opens the novel, 'we are, what we have lost' announces the nostalgia of a past which is not and points to the construction of an identity that is built on a ground of losses. *Indian Killer* is a 1996 novel with an open ended murder mystery. A serial killer begins killing and scalping white men which terrorizes Seattle city. These crime triggers violence and racial hatred between native Americans and non-natives. Parallel to this story is another storyline of John Smith who is born Indian but adopted by white parents Olivia and Daniel Smith. John, desperately yearns and dreams about his lost identity and heritage. He searches for his elusive but true identity; he also struggles with Schizophrenia since childhood. Other characters include Marie, the Indian activist outraged by racist men like Doctor Mather, a Professor, Jack Wilson, a mystery writer who claims to be part Indian and Truck Schultz, a radio personality who incites revenge from white. The killings and kidnappings become the motifs throwing light to what it means to be an Indian with killings and revenge tensions overshadowing the city of Seattle.

The natives in the novel are victims of colonization which has robbed them of their connection to their land and their stories that gave them a cultural identity. The Indian killer is cast in the stereotypical image of a warrior who moved in revenge, an image so common in popular culture

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today. Alexie does not go on to explain the cultural differences nor does he dwell on the habits, traditions, on beliefs of his people. And yet these markers of identity surface in the narrative, for example, the racial difference between John and his adoptive parents, "The stark difference in their physical appearances was a nagging reminder of the truth"(114). This difference is variously brought out by Alexie through many meaningful encounters like the racism in the radio presenter Truck Shultz, in the words of Marie with her college fellow students. Thus, native identity is at the center of the polemics of the novel. How this diverges into the many polyphonies is what *Indian Killer* is about.

As we go on to read the novel, we are struck not just with the polyphonic narrativization but with other features of Bakhtinian dialogism. According to Bakhtin, "Polyphony is what unfolds is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (7). Bakhtinian dialogism is a philosophy of language that is based on the process through which meaning evolves out of the interaction between the author, the text and the reader. According to Bakhtin, the novel flourishes on diversity. In his essay "Epic and the novel" he points out how the novel is able to swallow "and ape other genres". For him, the novel is an all encompassing fictional enterprise which is a whole phenomenon of 'multi-form' and 'veri-form', it is a structured artistic system which is unique and stylized. He says, "The stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of subordinated, yet relatively autonomous unities" (1192) which together make a higher unit of work. He goes on to add that "the novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the works of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it by means of the social diversity of speech types and by differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions"(1192). In discourse in the novel Bakhtin, thus, introduces the idea of Heteroglossia based on 'Extra linguistic' features common across languages, like perspective, evaluation and ideologies.

According to Bakhtin, language is through and through heteroglot because it represents socio-ideological contradiction between the present and the past, between socially different groups, between tendencies, ways of behaviour etc. these social and historical voices that populate a novel must be captured in a novel. Thus, all this together make up what goes for dialogism.

In his *Problems of Poetics*, Bakhtin developed the concept of Polyphony or multiple voices which points towards a plurality of consciousness and it is this that underlies the dialogical principle which is not simply different perspective on the same world but involves many incompatible elements within perspectives of equal value.

Bakhtinian Dialogics looks at various aspects of fictional narrative and posits certain relational interpretations. According to him, the interrelationships interwoven into a text are never monologic. There is always the other; whether it is a time sequence or a space sequence, this co-existence of 'otherness' Bakhtin discusses as Chronotopy. Chronotopy, according to Bakhtin, is the intrinsic

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connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. In the *Indian Killer*, the past and the present and the 'here' and the 'there' are conjoined in such a way that the characters live the two together. There is the past time which keeps breaking through the present time discourse and there is a continuous insertion of the reservation habitation into the Seattle scenario. Just as the Bakhtinian social world is made up of multiple voices so also is Alexie's world. These voices are of the past and the present, of the natives and the whites, of the oppressor and the oppressed, of the haves and the have nots. Thus, what we have as the voice of these characters is a heteroglossia since every one of the above binaries has a different point of view, a different voice. If we look at the three killings and the way these are looked upon, we will recognize the polyphonic heteroglossia.

After the first killing, the only witnesses are a bunch of young, drunk, teenagers who would not confess to seeing the deed done. Their perspective is clouded since they are in no position to clearly envisage the situation. After the killer's version of killing including the singing of visibility song, the narration of the whole episode is also followed by the announcement by the Radio Presenter and his take on the incident. On the same episode, there are three ways of putting it, coming from three different imaginaries and thus creating a heteroglossia view.

Similarly, another incident is when John imagines his life on the reservation is once again his own point of view for, he loves his people:

So," says his mother. "what did you do today?"

We were over to the pipes today," John says. He cannot lie.

"I told you not to go there," his mother says, little angry. John knows her anger is because of love. The pipes are abandoned sewer pipes piled on a hillside near the old high school. Rusted metal, in fifty-foot sections, the pipes are magical, the reservation playground. . . Only the strongest boys and girls can climb inside that pipe. . . Just that day, he had climbed into a cave beneath the pipes, a small cave with even smaller entrance. . . Somebody ran through the pipe directly above the cave. The echoes sounded like music. (47)

For the outsiders, such activities would seem silly, or funny but for John they are reminiscences of what he has lost. Also, it presents the real life situations on a reservation which are not very safe for children with such hazardous careless piles of pipes. Fr. Duncan also becomes a means for John to recollect the past. When he was young, Fr. Duncan took him "to see the Chapel of the North American Martyrs" where the red stained-glass paintings arrested the young boy's mind. He thought these to be the blood of the Martyred Jesuits (IK 13). Fr. Duncan, a painter himself, looked at the aesthetic value rather than the pain that the painting aroused.

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We also find instances of Bakhtinian Heteroglossia in Alexie's narrative. Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin takes place when the discourses of others are appropriated in the language of someone else. It refers to the co-existence of distinct varieties within a single language, and also different worldviews in one textual fabric. According to Bakhtin, there is always a multiplicity of languages within a narrative text because characters from different walks of life and from different histories are knitted together. According to Bakhtin, a narrative is a coalescence of separate entities who have come to live together through a process of adaptation. Alexie uses this percept in all his writings since most of his characters hail from the Spokane reservation but have relocated themselves in the modern American urban setting, the characters in *Indian killer* thus speak differently because of their varied cultural past and their believes. They stand apart and can be easily identified through their ways of thinking and believing.

Another narrative aspect that Bakhtin projects is Carnavalesque. Originating from the word 'Carnival', Bakhtin identifies different ways in which this works- it brings together very unlikely people who cross socio-hierarchical borders; it brings together people who ordinarily would be unacceptable in society, the high and the low, the great and the small; and lastly, the notion of 'sacredness' is dissolved. In the *Indian Killer*:

John watched all the Indians dancing in circles on the grass. It was an illegal powwow, not approved by the university. John could figure out that much when he noticed how the dancers were trampling on the well-kept lawn. Indians were always protesting something. Marie had organized the powwow as a protest against the University's refusal to allow a powwow. Only a few of the Indians had originally known that, but most everybody knew now, and danced all that much harder (IK 33).

Even towards the end, the last chapter titled "The Creation Story", we witness the carnivalesque in the joy displayed by the Indian killer when:

The killer spins in circles and, with each revolution, another owl floats in from the darkness and takes its place in the tree. Dark blossom after dark blossom. The killer sings and dances for hours, days. Other Indians arrive and quickly learn the song. A dozen Indians, then hundreds, and more, all learning the same song, the exact dance. The killer dances and will not tire. The killer knows this dance is over five hundred years old. The killer believes in all masks, in this wooden mask. The killer gazes skyward and screeches. With this mas, with this mystery, the killer can dance forever. (IK 420)

In doing so, the killer gives the space for vengeance for the Indian injustice. It makes the act of killing an act of justice. Thus, Alexie through his work *The Indian Killer* brings out the native tribulations faced over and over and voices the anxieties by a native in all walks of life. Bakhtin's theory helps us

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understand the layers of complex construction of native and non-nativeworld which Alexie skillfully portrays in his work. According to Bakhtin, this carnivalesque mode, is a kind of intensification of an emotion, a kind of creative spectacle in which someone participates through a release of emotions (176).

From the foregoing discussions on the narrative as Sherman Alexie fictionalizes and Bakhtinian theory frames it, we come to look at it as an “all-informing process” which is akin to the process of the human mind. This seems to be akin to what Lyotard calls “The quintessential form of customary knowledge.”(19). The narratives of Sherman Alexie confirm to what Lyotard has said for they encapsulate the whole tradition and culture of the native Americans. The way in which Alexie has done it by connecting the ways of being and becoming of the Indigenous people, punctuating them with their myths, legends, history and more. Such a varied and checkered content necessarily partakes of a Dialogics that Bakhtin could put together. Alexie has lived up to what Peter Brooks says of the narratives. “our very definition as human beings is bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives” (19). This being the deep structure, Alexie frames it in the Bakhtinian surface structure.

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