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The Role of Music in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

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Abstract

The present research analyses the decisive role of music in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995). The study focuses on the role that music can play in the spiritual life of people in general and of the Native American people in specifics. Sherman Alexie's novel, through presenting several examples and various characters, highlights and points out the cultural, social, psychological, and political functions of music in the Native American communities, especially in the reservations built allegedly to protect the identity of Native Americans across the United States. The research examines the tremendous role of music in preserving the Native American culture and identity through refreshing and reviving Native American people's collective unconsciousness that will create a collective mentality among them. Such a collective mentality will finally be a bridge between the old and the new generations.

I. Introduction

Sherman Alexie (1966-), the award-winning author, poet, and filmmaker is a Native American writer and novelist who was born on

the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington. He published his first novel *Reservation Blues* in 1995, that won the 1996 American Book Award. In his works, he explores topics related to

poverty, alcoholism, and conflict between Native American and white cultures.

Alexie was born at a time when Native American Renaissance was in full bloom. Historically, the Native American Renaissance can be divided into two waves. The first wave focused on tradition and the life in the reservation and the problems facing the Native American people. The second wave of the Native American Renaissance tackled the loss of identity, return to the native traditions, inherent suffering and historical trauma, and the social and political situation.

Alexie, whose works belong to the second wave of Native American Renaissance (from 1975 – up till now), focuses mainly on the restoration of the real Native American identity through reviving his people's old traditions and native culture. To Alexie, in order to survive in today's world, the new generations of the Native American people have to reconcile the concepts of "American" and "Indian" in the contemporary world. In *Reservation Blues*, most of the Native American characters suffer from alcoholism, corruption, and trauma that resulted from various forms of violence and when they try to go and find a place for themselves in the contemporary world, they face loneliness, prejudice, and humiliation at every turn.

II. The Blues: Origin, Form and Definition

In the Acknowledgements page of his novel *Reservation Blues*, Alexie expresses his

gratitude and indebtedness to Robert Johnson (May 8, 1911 – August 16, 1938), the American blues singer, songwriter and musician thus: “Most of all, I want to honor the memory of the real Robert Johnson. Without his music, none of the music contained in this book would exist.” (Alexie, p. V) This shows how much Alexie admires Robert Johnson's music which was a source of inspiration for his novel.

Elijah Wald, in *The Blues: A Very Short Introduction* (2010), investigates the origin of this type of song in many cultures and languages around the globe. He states that:

the word has been associated with mournful, heartrending songs in many languages and styles: *flamenco* is often described as Spanish Gypsy blues, *rembetika* as Greek blues, *morna* as Cape Verdean blues, *tango* as Argentine blues, *enka* as Japanese blues. (p. 2)

Furthermore, Elijah Wald specifies the most popular blues instruments as: “the slide guitar, the harmonica, the saxophone, and the standard guitar....” (p. 6) In addition to this, he draws distinctions between the blues and the mainstream pop music:

Mainstream pop favored romantic dreams, but blues dealt with the sorrows and joys of real relationships: cheating, abandonment, and abuse were balanced by exuberant physical pleasure. (p. 25)

Whereas according to J. A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013), the blues is:

A musical tradition deriving from folksongs of African-Americans in the Southern US at the end of the 19th c. Many blues songs are based on a three-line lyric and are often expressive of despair, grief and a general feeling of hopelessness. (p. 85)

John Drury, in his *The Poetry Dictionary* (2006), provides another definition and further information about the blues:

An African-American song form, derived from the field hollers of slaves in the South. It can refer

either loosely to a song about being blue, about loss and hard times, or more specifically to a song in three-line blues form, in which the first two lines are roughly identical and the third line rhymes with them. (pp. 42-43)

Jack Myers and Michael Simms, in their *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms* (1989) look at the blues from a different angle:

blues (from *blue devils*, agents of depression and melancholy) a melancholy song of loss or pain accompanied by guitar music and based on a repeating three-line set of lyrics. Although the songs were not known as "blues" until they were introduced into the mainstream of popular American music, they probably originated from the spontaneous "hollers" about hard times sung by Southern slaves and prisoners. Images of trains, prisons,

and hard labour are common, and the themes usually concern oppression or loss of love. (p. 34)

Almost in all the above sources, seven facts about the blues are stressed:

1. The blues is of African origin.
2. It appeared among the slaves and the down-trodden people of the American South in the late 19th century.
3. This type of song is fraught with pain, sadness and sorrow.
4. It is based on a three-line set of lyrics.
5. Singing that type of song is accompanied mainly by the guitar, and in some occasions harmonica or saxophone are also used.
6. The blues is the resistance song of the oppressed people.
7. It is a folk song sung collectively by a group of people who share the same feelings of loss and oppression.

III. The Similarity between African-Americans and the Red Indians

There is no doubt that there are similar features between the African Americans and the Native Americans. Both nations are exploited by the white Americans who try to assimilate both nations and erase their language, identity, and culture. The African Americans, being

transferred from their native land, are left without anything called their land. They were used as slaves from the moment they reached America and they have been treated in the most inhuman manner by their masters. To alleviate their pains of suffering and their traumatic experience, they voiced their feelings in a type of song known as the blues. Patricia L. Schroeder notes that the circumstances in which the blues originated in the contemporary Native American reservations and African American communities were quite similar. The similarity can be traced in the prevailing conditions of hunger, unemployment, loneliness, commodity food, shabby Housing and Urban Department houses in both communities. (p. 126)

In fact, the Native Americans or Red Indians are the indigenous people of America. In the pre-Columbian period, they lived on their own land since time immemorial. For thousands of years, they lived independently and they were the masters of their own land and life. They had their own languages, tradition, and culture. After the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, the Red Indians faced many problems starting with measles and smallpox, which harvested the lives of thousands of Native Americans who had no immunity to the disease. In the 16th and 17th centuries the clash and conflict started to emerge between the Red Indian tribes and the European invaders.

During the 18th and the 19th centuries many treaties were signed between the colonial powers and the American Indians. Most of these treaties

restricted the freedom of the Red Indians and “arranged for the transfer of millions of acres from Indian to American ownership.” (Bowes, 2007, p. 8) Following the Treaty of Paris in (1873) in which the American Independence was recognized, the situation of the Native Americans changed for the worse. The expansionists’ desire for the rich and the fertile land of the Red Indians was the main motive behind the *passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830*. John P. Bowes, in *The Trail of Tears: Removal in the South* (2007) recounts two other reasons for the passage of the Indian Removal Act:

Overall, two distinct factors set the stage for the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. First, both the Europeans and the Americans had an overwhelming desire for land. From the early 1600s to the early 1800s, their settlements extended farther inland into Indian territories. Treaties and legal rulings supported these actions. An official removal policy appeared to be the next logical step. The second factor rested on the assumed inferiority of

Indian peoples. People of the United States believed that Indian individuals and tribes could not survive the advance of Western civilization and were therefore destined to disappear. (pp. 17-18)

In 1839, the Indian Removal Act was put into practice and relocation of the Native American *living east of the Mississippi River* started in full swing. The forced relocation of the Native Americans was implemented in the most violent manner. They rounded up all the people living in the area with their African slaves as well. They were forced to leave their land during unfavorable conditions, which caused many fatalities among them during that long march which came to be known as “The Trail of Tears”:

In the fall and winter of 1838 and 1839, thousands of Cherokee men, women, and children walked, rode horses, and sat huddled in wagons. They bundled up against the rain, snow, and cold as best they could. Thousands died along the trail and were

buried in graves in Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas Territory. Those who survived would not forget. And when they arrived at Fort Gibson in present-day Oklahoma, they found themselves reunited with many of those who had set removal in motion. At the end of the Trail of Tears, the Cherokees under John Ross came face-to-face with the Treaty Party. (Bowes, 2007, p. 82)

On the way, during the Trail of Tears march, the Red Indians faced death, sorrow, hunger, exposure, and various kinds of humiliation. The Native American lands were occupied by the American white citizens and new settlements for the Red Indians were established in the areas to the west of the Mississippi River. After their arrival, the relocated Native Americans faced the grim reality of their future life. According to Hana Adámková (2010):

Half of the Native Americans on the reservations are unemployed and the state

financial assistance and benefits hardly cover the essential needs for a decent life. Moreover, the native culture and traditions has [sic.] begun to fade since there has been an increase in mixed marriages. (p. 33)

Only now, the Native Americans understood what kind of dark future awaited them. They knew very well that their lives will never be as before and it will be impossible for them to cope with the new environment:

A host of problems confronted the Cherokees in 1839, when they arrived at their new homes west of the Mississippi River. They had just endured a traumatic journey that wrenched them from their homelands. Many families had lost loved ones on the Trail of Tears, and few people had been able to bring material belongings with them. They also faced a new environment and struggled to find suitable

land on which to farm.

All of this made daily life difficult and further complicated the efforts to establish new homes.

(Bowes, 2007, pp. 95-96)

These settlements came to be known as reservations. Life on the reservations was full of problems that crippled the Native Americans. Tracey L. Connette in *SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION: RELOCATING THE CENTER OF INDIAN IDENTITY* (2010) describes "...Alexie's Indian reservation as a chaotic center, an actual location that presents the trauma and disarray of Indian culture." (p. 10) The Reservation, for Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, is the place of murdering all the dreams. (Alexie, p. 7) As such, a very narrow space was left for their freedom.

Sherman Alexie was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation and because he "spent his first 18 years on the reservation, it is not surprising that his early writing is dominated by it." (Webb, 2004, p. 3) As a result, his information about life on the reservation was first hand. Connette emphasizes that "Alexie is writing about his own experience and doesn't try to create an artificial "traditional" identity for himself." (p. 4) In *Reservation Blues*, through *Thomas Builds-the-Fire* who is Sherman Alexie's mouthpiece, he summarizes all the limitations imposed on the Native Americans as the following:

From Thomas Builds-the-Fire's journal:

The Reservation's Ten Commandments as Given by the United States of America to the Spokane Indians

1. You shall have no other forms of government before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an independent and self-sufficient, government, for I am a jealous bureaucracy and will punish the Indian children for the sins of their fathers to the seventh generation of those who hate me.
3. You shall not misuse my name or my symbols, for I will impale you on my flag pole.
4. Remember the first of each month by keeping it holy. The rest of the month you shall go hungry, but the first day of each month is a tribute to me, and you shall receive welfare checks and commodity food in

exchange for your continued dependence.

5. Honor your Indian father and Indian mother because I have stripped them of their land, language, and hearts, and they need your compassion, which is a commodity I do not supply.

6. You shall not murder, but I will bring FBI and CIA agents to your reservations and into your homes, and the most intelligent, vocal, and angriest members of your tribes will vanish quietly.

7. You shall not commit adultery, but I will impregnate your women with illegitimate dreams.

8. You shall not steal back what I have already stolen from you.

9. You shall not give false testimony against any white men, but they will tell lies about you, and I will believe them and convict you.

10. You shall not covet the white man's house.

You shall not covet the white man's wife, or his hopes and opportunities, his cars or VCRs, or anything that belongs to the white man. (pp. 154-155)

To assimilate them, the U.S. government tried to convert them into Christianity through building churches which mainly taught them lies, faith, and fear instead of love, peace, and forgiveness in the reservations (Alexie, p. 165) Building prison-like schools whose environments were mainly unfriendly and using the English language in those schools was another step of the U.S. government for assimilating them. Spreading the FBI and CIA agents in the reservations to spy on every move of the Native Americans was the U.S. government's next step. (Alexie, p. 33) The Native Americans were left mostly without medical care and they were treated as less than human beings. In fact, they were looked at as zombies by the white American people. (Alexie, P. 99) According to Gerald Vizenor, the U.S. authorities took these steps to kill their "indianness". (Vizenor, 1995, p. 1) With these three steps, the U.S. government wanted to erase the language, culture, and identity of the Red Indians once and for all.

IV. The Various Roles of Music in Reservation Blues

Abiding by the Reservation's Ten Commandments quoted above means spiritual death to the Native Americans, because "[w]hen tribal memory is repressed, all that remains to reconstruct the past and one's identity is the

dominant culture's "official story" as represented in historical monuments and markers." (Richardson, 1997. P. 41) Under such dire circumstances, only three choices are left for the Native Americans: they are dreaming, storytelling, and singing which are closely related. Psychologically speaking, when a certain human being's freedom is cornered by powers greater than his/hers, s/he can give vent to his/her suppressed feelings through storytelling, dreaming or singing which are all seated in the imagination of the person. That is why all pages of the novel are fraught with songs, stories, and dreams (and nightmares).

The first big event, after the suppression of the Native Americans and the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881 and after one hundred and eleven years (that is 1992), is the arrival (or the resurrection of the spirit) of Robert Johnson, the black blues singer who was dead since August 1938. His arrival there, his search for Big Mom, and his presentation of the magical guitar to Thomas Builds-the-Fire are all of symbolic significance. They can be interpreted as Robert Johnson guiding Thomas to the world of blues through which the Native American people can create and recreate their lost world. So, it was not in vain that Sherman Alexie named his novel *Reservation Blues*. Hana Adámková stresses the omnipresence of the blues in the novel. (2010, p.40) In addition, to highlight the significance of music, Alexie started each of the ten chapters of the novel with a lyric that reflected the lost dreams of the

Native Americans and the sufferings that the Red Indians tasted on the reservations under the draconic rules imposed on them by the white masters. According to Kimberly Renee Mack (2015):

It is through their storytelling, both in their song lyrics and in their constructed public personas, that these men and women were able to resist racial, social, economic, and gendered oppression and invent or re-invent themselves. (p. 14)

Before forming the musical band, Thomas thinks that storytelling is the best way to keep the memory of his ancestors alive. But his attempts are always met with neglecting, willful forgetting, and intentional denial by the members of his tribe. So, this feeling of being considered as the misfit storyteller among his own people pushes him to share "his stories with pine trees because people didn't listen." (Alexie, p. 28)

The lyrics of the blues most vividly reflect both the reality of the Native Americans' life and the violence practiced against them. According to Janine Richardson "Historic memory as well as tribal and individual memory play strong roles in the world of this novel...."

(pp. 39-40) Some of the lyrics are echoing the past events while others are expressing the present problems facing them in the reservations. To Alexie, these lyrics can resurrect the dying soul of the Red Indians and protect their culture and identity in the face of the hegemony of the powerful culture of the victorious expansionist white occupiers.

As stated before, the action of *Reservation Blues* is initiated with the arrival of a black mysterious man carrying a magical guitar on his back. The man proves to be the well-known blues singer Robert Johnson who has escaped from his boss, referred to as “the devil”, who wants to kill him. He has found no place in America to resort to except among the Native American people. The only person who can protect him from the evil magic of “the devil” is Big Mom, who is the strongest and most respected god-like women among the Native American residents of the Spokane reservation. Through Johnson’s resorting to Big Mom, Alexie builds a humanitarian bridge between the Native American and African American people. Moreover, Alexie builds a cultural bridge between the Native America and African American nations by giving Robert Johnson’s guitar to Thomas Builds-the-fire, the protagonist of *Reservation Blues*.

Schroeder thinks that Alexie places the blues music side by side with storytelling because she believes that “[t]he blues and storytelling fulfill similar cultural functions: preserve communal truths,

link artist to community, and pass down tools necessary for survival.” (2004, p.126)

The action of the novel is a mixture of realism and symbolism from the beginning to the end. By starting the action of his novel with the strange arrival of Robert Johnson, Sherman Alexie purposefully highlights and draws the attention of the reader to the fact that oppressed people can only find resort and assistance from each other. The second point that the novelist tries to stress is that music can be constructive if it is used for the sake of creating and recreating humanity in general and one’s nation in specifics, but it can be destructive if it is used for personal interest or commercial ends.

When Victor and Junior ask Thomas Builds-the-Fire about the guitar, he very clearly declares: “This is not my guitar but I’m going to change the world with it” (Alexie, p. 13). Moreover, Sherman Alexie, through mind reading of Robert Johnson points out the role of the blues in Chapter Six of *Reservation Blues* in this way:

Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them. Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up

generations of anger
and pain: car wrecks,
suicides, murders.
Those blues were
ancient, aboriginal,
indigenous.

In his bed, Thomas
Builds-the-Fire had
recognized Robert
Johnson's voice as
those blues drifted
down from Big
Mom's mountain. But
Thomas also heard
something hidden
behind the words. He
heard Robert
Johnson's
grandmother singing
backup. Thomas
closed his eyes and
saw that grandmother
in some tattered cabin.
No windows, blanket
for a door, acrid
smoke. Johnson's
grandmother was not
alone in that cabin.
Other black men,
women, and children
sang with her. The
smell of sweat, blood,
and cotton filled the
room. Cotton, cotton.

Those black people
sang for their God;
they sang with joy and
sorrow. (pp. 174-175)

In the above quotation there is an implicit reference to the shared history and memory of the Black-Americans and the Native American people. This connection is historical and it goes back to many generations before, and with the help of the blues these memories can be kept alive. When Robert Johnson sings from Big Mom's mountain, his grandmother sings back. Symbolically, this means that through blues, strong connection between generations and inter-generations can be built.

Looking at the blues written at the beginning of each chapter, one can find significant knowledge about the past and the present of the Native Americans in an amazing way. In the song titled "Reservation Blues" at the beginning of Chapter One, one can feel that the Red Indians are left alone and they are neglected by the U.S. authorities. That is why the singer is singing out of the pain of loneliness and hunger:

*Dancing All Alone, Feeling nothing good
It's been so long since someone understood
All I've seen is, is why I weep
And all I had for dinner was some sleep*

*You know I'm lonely, I'm so lonely
My heart is empty and I've been so hungry*

*All I need for my hunger to ease
Is anything that you can give me please
(Alexie, p. 1)*

At the beginning of Chapter Two, the lyric which is called “Treaties” refers to all the treaties made between the Red Indian tribes and the U.S. authorities. Those treaties, which were given by the government to the Indians, were full of honeyed promises of a decent life. But in fact, the opposite proved to be true because after the treaties the life of the Indians changed for the worse and a bitter future faced most of them, which broke their hearts:

*Somebody breaks a hard promise
Somebody breaks your tired heart
.....
Treaties never surrender
I'm sure treaties we made are gonna break this
Indian's heart
(Alexie, pp. 31-32)*

The notorious “Trail of Tears” is the main topic of the lyric ironically called “Indian Boy Love Song” at the beginning of Chapter Three. In this lyric, Sherman Alexie, reminds the Native Americans of the sufferings they tasted long ago as the colonizers separated lovers from their beloved ones, usurped their land, and changed their lives for the worse once and for all:

I saw you walkin with those dark legs of yours

*I felt you walking through my sweatlodge doors
And don't you wonder when you're there in the
dark
Just hear the drummer beating time with your
heart*

*I hear you talking about your Trail of Tears
If you feel the need I can help calm all your
fears
I'll be here watching and I'll wait for your call
I'll catch you sweetheart when you feel you may
fall
(Alexie, p. 53)*

Again, the lyric titled “Father and Farther” which comes at the beginning of Chapter Four reflects the agony and the sufferings the Native Americans tasted during the ignominious “Trail of Tears”. The song highlights the relationship between the children and their fathers who could not make for the long journey. The repetition of the sentence “*If you know how much farther we need to go?*” by the child shows that the child is very tired and wants to reach his destination which is even unknown to the father:

*Sometimes, father, you and I
Are like a three-legged horse
Who can't get across the finish line
No matter how hard he tries and tries and tries

And sometimes, father, you and I
Are like a warrior
Who can only paint half of his face*

While the other half cries and cries and cries
(Alexie, p. 93)

The lyric titled “My God Has Dark Skin” at the beginning of Chapter Five reflects how the U.S. authorities (through using black robes that symbolized the Catholic priests) did the impossible to assimilate the Red Indians. Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, tells Chess a story about the role of religion in eliminating the Red Indians:

“All those soldiers
killed us in the name
of God, enit? They
shouted ‘Jesus Christ’
as they ran swords
through our bellies.
Can you feel the pain
still, late at night,
when you’re trying to
sleep, when you’re
praying to a God
whose name was used
to justify the
slaughter?” (Alexie, p.
167)

Religion, which is supposed to be the purest type of worship is used to silence and suppress the Red Indians’ culture and erase their identity. In the end of the song, which is sung by the chorus, there is hope because through resistance the

Indian spirit could revive and resist the hegemony of the dominant culture:

*My braids were cut off in the name of Jesus
To make me look so white
My tongue was cut out in the name of Jesus
So I would not speak what’s right
My heart was cut out in the name of Jesus
So I would not try to feel
My eyes were cut out in the name of Jesus
So I could not see what’s real*

Chorus

.....
*I had my braids cut off by black robes
But I know they’ll grow again
I had my tongue cut out by these black robes
But I know I’ll speak ’til the end
I had my heart cut out by the black robes
But I know what I still feel
I had my eyes cut out by the black robes
But I know I see what’s real*
(Alexie, pp. 131-132)

In the lyric called “Falling Down and Falling Apart” which makes the beginning of Chapter Six, there is a reference to Big Mom who lives in the mountains and who is “a musical genius” and god-like figure and the “the teacher of all those great musicians who shaped the twentieth century” (Ibid., p. 201). She taught great musicians like Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and many others.” (Ibid., p. 10) She can also make musical instruments from different materials such as the ribs of the

murdered Indian horses: “But she saved the bones of the most beautiful horse she found and built a flute from its ribs. Big Mom played a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily.” (Ibid., p. 10) She lives in the mountains and has magical powers in singing, healing, and storytelling. Not only human beings will be enchanted by her songs, even birds can be affected by her song as well: “She didn’t teach just humans how to sing. When those birds heard her mourning song, they also wondered which of their tribe had fallen.” (Ibid., p. 201) She is the symbol of “indianness” and the archives of the Red Indian tradition and culture. She is also the powerful medicine woman whom people resort to in the time of need. Through her medicine and her wisdom, she can heal all the physical and the psychological diseases harassing the weary spirit of the Red Indians. She wants the Red Indians to be educated and be open to the world. She also wants to disseminate the culture of her people through music:

*I know a woman, Indian in her bones
Who spends the powwow dancing all alone
She can be lonely, sometimes she can cry
And drop her sadness into the bread she fries*

Chorus

*But she don’t want a warrior and she don’t want
no brave
And she don’t want a renegade heading for an
early grave*

*She don’t need no stolen horse, she don’t need
no stolen heart*

*She don’t need no Indian man falling down and
falling apart*

(Alexie, p.171)

In the song called “Big Mom” which comes at the beginning of Chapter Seven, Sherman Alexie highlights the humanitarian spirit of Big Mom whose spirit represents the unselfish, cooperative, patient and resisting spirit of all the unspoiled Red Indians. She represents, in the song, the voice of history speaking on behalf of all the Native Americans. She is the epitome of all tribes because “[s]he was a part of every tribe.” (Alexie, p.199) She is the store of thousands of unheard stories and the forgotten native music:

*There is a grandmother talking to me
There’s a grandmother talking to you
There’s a grandmother singing for me
There’s a grandmother singing for you*

*And if you stop and listen
You might hear what you been missing
And if you stop and listen
You might hear what you been missing*

*And I hear Big Mom
Telling me another story
And I hear Big Mom
Singing me another song
(Alexie, p. 197)*

In the lyric titled “Urban Indian Jobs” which is included at the beginning of Chapter Eight, Sherman Alexie recounts all types of difficulties and humiliations facing the Red Indian when they leave their reservations. After discarding their identity represented by cutting their hair, they are relocated in a dirty hotel full of rats which is symbolically called “The Tomb” and are given menial jobs. Then when they wanted to return home and get their wages, they were cheated by the landlady who called them “crazy” and she raised the rent. The boss is also no better than the landlady because he does not give them their wages:

*I've been relocated and given a room
In a downtown hotel called The Tomb
And they gave me a job and cut my hair
I trip on rats when I climb the stairs
.....
I'm saving money for the Greyhound
'Cause I want to be homeward bound
But the landlady raises the rent
The boss don't know where my check went
(Alexie, pp. 221-222)*

The focus of the following lyric which is called “Small World” that comes at the beginning of Chapter Nine is on the life at the reservation. It depicts the various problems that ended the life of the Red Indians. Alcoholism, car wrecking, and disappearance and murdering Indian girls by some white wolves are

highlighted. The sad thing about this “Small World” is that it is neglected by the international community and the U.S. government as well. No one pays attention to or even mentions these events because the lives of the Native Americans are considered less than worthless:

*Indian Boy takes a drink of everything that killed
his brother
Indian boy drives his car through the rail, over
the shoulder
Off the road, on the rez, where survivors are
forced to gather
All his bones, all his blood, while the dead
watch the world shatter*

chorus:

*But it's a small world
You don't have to pay attention
It's the reservation
The news don't give it a mention
Yeah, it's a small world
Getting smaller and smaller and smaller*

*Indian girl disappeared while hitchhiking on the
old highway
Indian girl left the road and some white wolf ate
her heart away
Indian girl found naked by the river, shot twice
in the head
One more gone, one more gone, and our world
fills with all of our dead
(Alexie, p.245)*

The lyric called “Wake” which is placed at

the beginning of Chapter Ten, has double meaning. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2002), the word "wake" as a verb means "1. To stop sleeping; 2. to make sb [somebody] remember sth [something] or feel sth [something] again". But as a noun, the word means "an occasion before a funeral when people gather to remember the dead person, traditionally held at night to watch over the body before it is buried." (pp. 1452-1453) In the lyric both meanings of the verb and the meaning of the noun are applicable. Taking the meaning of the word as a verb, Alexie urges his people that they should stop sleeping and have to remember all the Native American people who died by car wrecks, suicides, alcoholism, etc. To Sherman Alexie, stopping sleeping is what he means most because he uses the word "alive" for twelve times (twelve times might be reference to the twelve months of the year) side by side with "wake". Symbolically speaking, this means that the Red Indians have to "wake alive" throughout the year because only in this way they can remember and protect their culture and identity:

*I saw ten people die before I was ten years old
And I knew how to cry before I was ever born*

Wake alive, alive, wake alive, alive

*Sweetheart, I know these car wrecks are nearly
genetic*

*Sweetheart, I know these hands have been
shaking for generations*

*And they shake and shake and shake and shake
Sweetheart, I know these suicides are always
genetic*

.....
I can't bury my grief

Unless I bury my fear

.....
Wake alive, alive, wake alive, alive

.....
And I think it's time for us to find a way

Yeah, I think it's time for us to find a way

*To wake alive, to wake alive, to wake alive, to
wake alive*

(Alexie, pp. 275-276)

Alexie deliberately sets Robert Johnson's song as the prologue to the novel, because the song stressed the weak spirit of the singer which symbolically reflects the hesitancy and confusion of the conquered nations. The hesitancy of the singer is denoted by the word "crossroads" and his despair is highlighted by falling on the "knees". Directly, after Johnson's song, the lyric titled "Reservation Blues" is placed. In the song, the singer is sad, lonely, hungry and is weeping. In contrast to this, the novel ends with a very hopeful note when Chess, Checkers, and Thomas sing collectively in the blue van and drive towards the city accompanied by the shadow horses. In the meantime, Big Mom sings a protection song for them so that "none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are." (Alexie, p. 306)

In short, a careful reader can observe that music decisively changes the life of most of the Native American and non-Native American characters. This change starts with the dreaming Thomas Builds-the-fire and extends to Victor, the bullying character, the disappointed Junior, the magical guitarist Robert Johnson, the dimwitted Michael White Hawk, the Indian-massacring U.S. Cavalry generals Phil Sheridan, and George Wright, to name only few of them.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, one can find out clearly that in *Reservation Blues* music plays a tremendous role in:

- 1) Preserving the Native American Culture and Identity so as to avoid being assimilated in the streamline American society;
- 2) Recording their unwritten and distorted history;
- 3) Refreshing and reviving Native American people's collective unconsciousness, which will finally create a collective mentality among them;
- 4) Assisting in developing Native American characters who are plighted with psychological and social diseases;
- 5) Building a strong bridge between the old and the new generation;
- 6) Healing the inherited sufferings and the deep trauma of the Native American individual;
- 7) Transmitting their knowledge about existence and ecological preservation;
- 8) Creating rapture in the singer and catharsis in the listener;
- 9) Purifying the Native American spirit from violence instilled into them by the white occupiers and music can be an antidote;
- 10) Reinventing their lost world and recreating their destroyed natural habitat in the mind of the listeners;
- 11) Helping the Native Americans face their sordid reality instead of escaping from it;
- 12) Moralizing the deviant Native American individuals;
- 13) Helping the Native American to reconcile with their enemies; and finally
- 14) Giving voice to their anger as an expression of the Native American protest against all the injustices perpetrated by the White people against them and resistance to all forms of cultural assimilation.

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