

UNDERSTANDING NATIVE AMERICAN POETRY

America is a land of diverse identities weaved together to become what it is today. Native American are the indigenous people of America who have faced severe discrimination and subjugation in a white dominated world. Native American poetry is a rich and diverse literary tradition that reflects the history, culture, and experiences of Indigenous peoples in North America. It encompasses a wide range of styles, themes, and voices, with each tribal group and individual poet offering a unique perspective on their heritage and contemporary issues. Some renowned Native American Poets include notable figures like Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek), who became the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2019, and Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), whose works explore themes of identity and cultural conflict.

Characteristics of Native American Poetry are:

1. **Oral Tradition:** Native American poetry has deep roots in oral tradition. For centuries, Indigenous peoples have used oral storytelling, chants, songs, and spoken word performances to pass down their history, myths, and spiritual beliefs. These oral traditions are integral to the poetry of Native American cultures.
2. **Cultural Diversity:** Native American poetry is not a monolithic tradition but a diverse tapestry of voices and traditions. There are over 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States alone, each with its own language, customs, and artistic expressions. Native American poetry reflects this diversity, with poets drawing from their tribal backgrounds and personal experiences.
3. **Connection to Nature:** Many Native American poems emphasize a profound connection to the natural world. Nature is often depicted as a spiritual force and a source of wisdom, and poems frequently explore themes of ecological harmony, the seasons, and the relationship between humans and the environment.
4. **Themes:** Native American poetry addresses a wide range of themes, from historical trauma, colonialism, and displacement to contemporary issues such as cultural preservation, identity, and the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in the modern world. These poems often blend traditional and contemporary elements.
5. **Language:** Native American poets often incorporate their tribal languages, English, or a blend of both in their work. This linguistic diversity allows poets to convey the nuances of their culture and worldview. Some poets also experiment with language and form to create innovative and evocative poetry.

6. Recognition and Representation: Native American poetry has gained increasing visibility and recognition in recent years. Native poets and scholars have played a crucial role in advocating for accurate representation and inclusion of Indigenous voices in the literary world.
7. Healing and Resilience: Native American poetry is often seen as a means of healing and resilience for Indigenous communities. It provides a platform for self-expression, cultural preservation, and the reclamation of identity and heritage.

As such Native American poetry is a vital and diverse literary tradition that draws on oral storytelling, cultural diversity, and a deep connection to nature. It reflects the rich heritage and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples while contributing to a broader understanding of their history and culture.

‘EVOLUTION’ BY SHERMAN ALEXIE

"Evolution" is a poem by Sherman Alexie, an acclaimed Native American writer. It was published in his best-selling 1992 collection, *The Business of Fancy-Dancing*. With Alexie's characteristic dark humor, the poem examines the exploitation of indigenous Americans. It also features a modernized version of the famous frontiersman Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody), whose 19th-century roadshow "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" sensationalized life on the frontier and battles with American Indians for entertainment and profit. This time, Bill opens up a 24/7 pawn shop on a reservation where the local "Indians" go to sell their possessions. After they've pawned off everything they have, Bill opens up a "Museum of Native American Cultures"—selling a hollow experience of the same traditions and identities that he essentially destroyed. The poem works as an extended metaphor for the continued devastation and exploitation of native peoples. The poem reflects on themes of loss of identity, exploitation and destruction of heritage.

In "Evolution," Alexie points out the dark and grim realities of the lives of Native-American people, who have to constantly suffer at the hands of exploitative white oppressors while also battling issues such as alcoholism, gambling, and poverty in their respective reservations. While Buffalo Bill's motives in opening a pawn shop seem neutral at first glance, it quickly becomes apparent that his sole purpose is to exploit the indigenous individuals for his personal gain. The very fact that the shop is across from a "liquor store" and he stays open 24/7 is proof enough of his manipulative, selfish tendencies. Buffalo Bill keeps exploiting the natives and taking their items until they come to sell even their bones and body parts. This depicts the height of exploitation by oppressors. "Evolution" is a commentary on years of systemic oppression and cultural appropriation that white people meted out to Native people. The fact that Bill continues taking everything he can get his hands on of the Indigenous people and pays a pittance for them shows that his sole aim is to selfishly gain and plunder as much as possible – which is an extended metaphor for white settlers' atrocities and plundering of Native people.

The ending is extremely dark and ironic – the very person who is responsible for the poverty and marginalization of native people is the one who now opens up a museum in their name and portrays himself as the protector and promoter of "Native American cultures." A more profound irony is that the

cultures of native individuals have been commodified, and they are so separate and lost so much that these individuals have to pay money to see their own cultural remnants put on display in a gross exhibitionistic fashion. It is also essential to consider a deeper interpretation of the last line of the poem. Buffalo Bill opens this “museum” in the same place as the pawnshop – in the reservation. Reservations were sort of “allotted” spaces for Native Americans to live in, which was itself based on the ideas of exclusion and curbing their freedom. This meant that a reservation was vastly comprised only of Indigenous people. It suggests that most visitors to the “museum” would be the Native people from the reservation, which only enhances the irony of the poem. They have to pay five dollars each to see their own culture appropriated, misrepresented, and stolen from them by the settlers in the “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES.”

Questions and Answers:

Q 1. What is the poem “Evolution” by Sherman Alexie about?

Sherman Alexie’s “Evolution” is about a venture capitalist, Buffalo Bill, who opens a pawnshop in an Indian reservation near a liquor store. Due to their poverty, the Indians pawn everything they own in order to sustain their family, while some pawn their valuables to buy liquor from across the border store. After accumulating everything, Bill revamps his pawnshop and builds a museum displaying the items he gained from a cheap bargain. Now, he charges an entry fee of five bucks from the Indians to just enter the museum.

Q 2. Justify the title of the poem “Evolution.”

Sherman Alexie uses the title “Evolution” to heighten the irony of the poem and speak of the history of oppression and cultural appropriation that indigenous people have to suffer. Buffalo Bill sets up “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES” comprising of the things he obtained from the indigenous people in the reservation itself. The title plays on the idea of the “evolution” and origin of the museum – people are rarely aware of the cultural appropriation and history of marginalization behind the things displayed in museums. Alexie tries to point out how the things that are oft-glorified and marveled at usually have a painful history and an evolutionary plot. A person who visits Buffalo Bill’s museum will only marvel at the exhibition of Native American cultures. Still, they will never understand the whitewashed narrative and injustice that the people of those cultures have undergone, only to have themselves humiliatingly misrepresented. Thus, Alexie focuses on the “devolution” of indigenous cultures, with the ironical story of the museum’s “evolution.”

Q 3. What does Sherman Alexie attempt to portray in his poem “Evolution”?

In this poem, Alexie hints at the appropriation and exploitation of indigenous people through the story of Buffalo Bill. The “evolution” of Buffalo Bill from a pawnbroker to a museum owner is portrayed through this poem.

Q 4. What does the poem “Evolution” signify?

The poem signifies how the white settlers actually traded with the indigenous American people. In order to emancipate them from their condition, they made the indigenous people trade their valuables and, most importantly, their identity in return for a place (reservation) to live safely.

Q 5. When did Sherman Alexie write “Evolution”?

In 1987, Sherman Alexie took up creative writing and became acquainted with Chinese-American poet Alex Kuo, who inspired Alexie to write poetry. Later, he started writing and published the first book of poetry, *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems*, in 1992. The poem “Evolution” appears in this collection.

Q 6. What is the theme of the poem “Evolution” by Sherman Alexie?

The central theme of “Evolution” is the exploitation, obliteration, and appropriation of Native American cultures at the hand of the white settlers beginning from the 17th-century and later at the hands of the American government.

Q 7. What is the tone of the poem “Evolution”?

The speaker of “Evolution” tells the story of Buffalo Bill in a satiric tone. He mockingly describes how the Indians of the reservation lost their belongings, cultural artifacts, and even their identity to a mere pawnbroker. Later, when he opens up a museum, it not only displays an “exotic” culture but the “disease” that is eating the indigenous cultures from within.

Q 8. What does the “pawn shop” symbolize in “Evolution” by Sherman Alexie?

The “pawn shop” of Buffalo Bill symbolizes a means to appropriate and obliterate the indigenous cultures. Through this shop, Alexie portrays how the Indians are ready to even trade their identity for measly “twenty bucks”!

Q 9. What is the irony in “Evolution” by Sherman Alexie?

The irony of the poem lies in the last stanza of the poem. It begins with the line, “when the last Indian has pawned everything/ but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks.” Alexie describes how the Indian trades his roots for twenty dollars. The irony is stretched further with the all-capital hoarding of the museum, “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES.” Lastly, the irony hits right at the core with the fact that now Indians have to “pay” to see what they have “pawned.”

‘CROW TESTAMENT’ BY SHERMAN ALEXIE

Sherman Alexie’s “Crow Testament” is a symbolic poem about Native American history. Alexie alludes to a number of biblical episodes from the Old and New Testaments in order to depict how a symbolic “Crow”, representing Indigenous Americans, is treated in the past. This poem is chiefly about the loss of their culture, habitation, and above all cultural identity. It is a poem of protest that implicitly agonizes over loss and suffering. It is also a metaphorical poem that presents a number of biblical allusions, from the episode of Creation to the Revelation

projected in the New Testament. Though this poem is not about the Christian culture, it seeks references from their sacred text in order to create contrast and present similarities. There are a total of seven sections. Each of them details how a symbolic “crow” is treated in different scenarios.

In the first section, Cain uses the crow as a weapon to kill his brother Abel. According to Alexie’s speaker, it is just the beginning of the story. Then it is seen to be an innocent creature whose items are stolen frequently by powerful creatures such as falcons. In the third section, Alexie talks about religion and how the crow’s Testament projects Gods that are alike the creature. Then he alludes to the Battle of Jericho where the crow was present. It lost its firstborn son there. The fifth section is about the feud of crows. In the next section, the poem takes a contemporary turn. Here, Alexie depicts the crow as a beer-bottle collector. It finds bottles around a reservation and sells them at five cents per bottle. In the end, the poet alludes to the episode of Revelation where the crow rides a pale horse and visits a powwow, a social gathering of Native Americans. None of them panics as if they have approached the end of the world. Here, the “crow” acts as a symbol of death.

The poem begins with a reference to a biblical episode. Alexie refers to the first two sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. In the book of Genesis, Cain murdered Abel, being jealous of the latter. Thus, Cain became the first murderer of humankind. He is considered to be the promoter of evil, violence, and greed on earth. In this poem, Alexie alters the narrative and says that Cain killed his brother with a “Crow”, the “heavy black bird”. In the actual narrative, he used a rock to mortally wound his brother. So, here, the “Crow” acts as a symbol of death and destruction. By alluding to this episode, Alexie metaphorically taps on a different idea. He talks about how the first violent act of human history can be compared to the settlement of Europeans in America. The term “Crow” is personified by capitalizing the first letter. It is used as a proper noun that symbolically refers to the indigenous people of America. In each section, the speaker reads out the events, and the crow replies by repeating the expression “Damn” at the beginning of his remarks. In the first section, the Crow ironically says that it is “just the beginning.” This “beginning” is the nod to human history that is stained with the blood of several innocent humans including the native Americans.

In section two of “Crow Testament”, Alexie compares white European settlers to a bird of prey, “falcon”. They disguised themselves as falcons and swooped in the land of native Americans. Here, the poet implicitly compares the settlers to treacherous falcons. The falcon snatches the salmon from the Crow’s talons or claws. The reference to the “salmon” is important to understand. It is a symbolic reference to the first salmon ceremony of indigenous Americans. Due to building dams on the Colorado River, salmon could not enter the river from the sea. So, the natives could not get enough fish to observe this ceremony. Alexie references this idea through the image of the falcon snatching away salmon from the Crow’s talons. In the following lines, the Crow replies in a similar manner by expressing his disgust that if it could swim it would have left this place as soon as possible. During the European settlement, the atrocities against natives hiked. They wanted to leave their land but for deep affection for their motherland, they could not do so. The use of the word “damn” is important as the poet repeats the term in each section. The term denotes being condemned by God to suffer eternal

punishment in hell. For indigenous people, their habitation turned into hell after the advent of whites. They infiltrated their lands, destroyed their culture, and affected their lives.

The third section of the “Crow Testament” begins with a reference to the orthodox Christian religion. Alexie depicts how the bibles depict God as a mere human being. It makes him think about the origin of religion. So, the Gods created by men are like them, greedy, opportunistic, and violent. The poet presents this idea by saying that the “Crow God” looks exactly like a Crow. The Crow remarks that as its God looks like it, it is easier to worship itself. It means that human beings created their own version of God. So, it is easier for them to worship someone who shares their vices and virtues. By referring to this idea, Alexie reveals the reality of institutional religion. He shows the inherent flaws of religion. After the advent of Europeans, they started to convert Indians into Christianity without bothering about their beliefs. In this way, they used religion as a tool of colonization. Here, Alexie tries to say that their religion serves their cruel motives.

Alexie alludes to another biblical episode of the Battle of Jericho. This battle is mentioned in the Old Testament. It was the first battle fought by the Israelites to conquer Canaan. In this Battle, Israelites invaded Canaan and killed every man and woman irrespective of their age. What the Bible says is that they killed several innocent humans by following “God’s law”. Their leader Joshua cursed anybody who tried to rebuild their city with the deaths of their firstborn and youngest child. This curse was eventually fulfilled. This battle echoes the history of native Americans. When the settlers came, they did the same thing as the Israelites did by following “God’s law”. In this way, greedy men used “God” and man-made laws, terming them as “God’s commandments” to fulfill their evil wishes. Alexie refers to this biblical story in the first two lines of the fourth section. In the following lines, he describes millions of “nests”, symbolically representing native Americans, are soaked with blood. This brutal image hints at the ruthless killings of innocent tribes.

The fifth section of “Crow Testament” depicts how Crows fight. Here, the poet implicitly hints at the tribal feud. The Europeans conspired against their unity and made them fight with each other. Furthermore, the poet depicts how their sky gets filled with Crows’ beaks and talons. This imagery can be interpreted in another way. Here the “Crows” stand as a symbol of European settlers. They came into their land and started fighting for supremacy. Some of them also waged wars against the native tribes. In the last line, the speaker remarks that in their feud, only the “Crows”, this time used as a symbol of natives, are affected. The “raining” of “feathers” depicts the loss of their cultural values. Each feather symbolically represents its value and custom. A crow’s identity is its black feathers. Likewise, their values are tied with their cultural identity. The settlers plucked their feathers and implanted their European values.

In the sixth section, Alexie talks about the building of reservoirs and dams on the habitation of Native Americans along the Colorado River. These imperialist developments uprooted them from their birthplace. Not only that, it had severe ecological effects. Alexie says that now the Crow flies over those reservations and collects empty beer bottles. Here, the “beer bottles” hints at the growing alcoholism in native Americans. Being unable to channelize their anger, they become addicted to alcohol. According to the poet, the Crow cannot carry the bottles all at one go. It carries them one by one and sells them for five cents per bottle. Here, Alexie depicts how the indigenous people live now. Previously they depended on nature for a living. Now, they are made to live on the leftovers of the settlers. The Crow finds it difficult to redeem

its community from this heinous cycle of suffering. This ironic remark “redemption is not easy” also hints at the poet’s hopelessness regarding the future of his people.

The last section of “Crow Testament” alludes to one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse. Alexie depicts the crow as riding on a pale horse. In the book of Revelation, the fourth horse that is pale green stands for death. So, here the crow is depicted as a messenger of death or one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse. In the biblical narrative, this fourth horseman is shown as a destroyer of an empire. The crow rides the horse into a crowded powwow. A powwow is a traditional, social gathering of native Americans. According to the speaker, none of them panic as the formidable horse rider enters into their occasion. It seems they are happy with its advent as it is going to hack the empire from its very roots. In the last two lines, the Crow ironically remarks that they are not showing signs of fear as they know that the apocalypse is near. The last line also alludes to Alexie’s poem “The Powwow at the End of the World.” In this poem, he depicts how the dead Indians would observe a powwow at the end of the world. They would gather to see how the torturers are punished at the end.

"Crow Testament" thereby is a powerful poem by Sherman Alexie in which he offers a reflection on the history and resilience of Native Americans, drawing a parallel with biblical teachings. The poem emphasizes the enduring strength and cultural richness of Native communities despite the many challenges they have faced throughout history. It serves as a testament to the ongoing struggle and survival of Native American people and their cultural heritage.