

Myth Of A Grandmother Spirit And Matriarchy in Sherman Alexie's The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

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*"I write about the kind of Indian I am: kind of mixed up, kind of odd, not traditional. I'm a rez kid
who's gone urban"*

- Sherman Alexie.

Sherman Alexie is one of the outstanding literary figures among the contemporary Native American writers. He belongs to the Native American Renaissance which began after the publication of N. Scott Momaday's magnum opus, *House Made of Dawn* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. He is the winner of the National Book Award. He pursued a prolific literary career not at all confined to a single genre. He was a poet, short story writer, novelist and script writer of films. He not only brings into his works the disparate elements in American society but also challenges our perceptions of it.

His famous works include a collection of short stories called *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, His first novel is *Reservation Blues* and his first adult novel is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* which won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. His collection of short stories called *War Dances* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Arnold Spirit Jr., in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has great respect and love for his grand mother. His grand mother is the matriarch not only of his family but to the whole of the

native Americans of Spokane Indian reservation. She is known to all other Indian reservations around Spokane.

Arnold's grandmother was held in high esteem as Grandmother Spirit by the Indians living in all the nearby reservations. Archaeologists like Marija Gimbutas have dug up prehistoric forms to argue that matriarchal societies worshipped an ancient Great Goddess. Australian anthropologist Diane Bell has focused attention on the spiritual and ceremonial roles of women as owners and managers of land in aboriginal societies. It is the same scenario prevailing over other indigenous tribes across America.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, we can see the grandmother of Arnold Spirit raised to the level of Great mother Spirit. This Great mother Spirit standing on a high pedestal of a Great Goddess can be equated to an ancient Great Goddess.

According to the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung it can be assumed that all human beings collectively share the archetype of a grandmother, a grand matriarch. This is particularly so in the Native American tribes which mostly follow a matriarchal system of family structure.

In the Spokane reservation, as in any other reservation, the relationship of the children to the parents and to the grandparents is on strong grounds. This is so with each of the reservations where the children are so intimate with their parents, domestic dog or cat. An Indian is aware even of the size of the shoes of others. In the reservation everybody knows everybody.

Arnold's grandmother was smart and kind and had travelled to hundreds of different reservations. In Arnold's relationship to his grandmother we can see the element of love which gets transformed into a kind of spiritual kinship. To the Native Americans love and spirituality are inseparable from each other.

In *Indian Killer* also we can see the power of love between a mother and a son. When John leaves for college his mother cautions him against the white people who might harm him. Zits in 'Flight' dreams a lot about his mother. Jimmy, as Zits incarnation, says, "I miss her all the time I want to see her again"(109).

Arnold's attachment to and adoration of his grandmother and his dedication to the Greatmother Spirit denotes his concern for the age-old practice of that institution called matriarchy and above all the cultural tradition of the native Americans. In *Reservation Blues*, we can see another character of Great Mom with mythical dimension.

His grandmother was a great matriarch of the Spokane Indian community who used to participate in all the powwows held across the country. Every Indian who participated in these powwows had known her. Her fame was closely associated with the carnival of powwows. She loved everybody in the reservation and she was loved in turn by all. She was best known for her quality of tolerance. It is basically born out of understanding and love for others. His grandmother is an epitome of this love of diversity and tolerance.

After punching Roger, a fat white classmate of Arnold Spirit Jr., at Rearden school, Arnold went to his grandmother to elicit her views on the incident. First, she told him that Arnold could have walked away from the scene before entering into a scuffle with Roger. When Arnold told her that Roger called him "Chief" and "squaw boy", his grandmother supported him. He felt love towards his grandmother for it. Arnold expected a retaliatory act from Roger. But, he did not retaliate. His grandmother was right when she told that Roger would feel respect for Arnold for challenging the pressure that he put on him as the head boy of the class. This incident redoubled the love that he had already felt towards his grandmother. He held that his grandmother was the smartest person who ever lived on the planet.

To Arnold the best thing about Wellpinit, his birth place in the reservation, was the presence of his grandmother, just as the best things for him at Rearden were his friends like Penelope and Gordy. For him his grandmother was the most amazing person in the world. That kind of relationship with his grand mother was a hilarious thing for him. He perceived that her greatness did not rest on her visiting more than hundred Indian reservations. But, he liked her for being smart and kind. Above all, it seemed to him that out of all of her personal gifts the most striking one was her spirit of tolerance. This was so in the old tradition of Indians who celebrated people who were weird. It may be remembered that the Indians celebrated people like epileptics and gays. Many of the Indians have gradually become judgmental and hateful in line with the white men who came to

America with Christianity. But, his grandmother was a person who did not change from the old tradition; she never changed with the changing times. She continued to hang on to that old Indian spirit of tolerance and acceptance. His grandmother spoke to the homeless people who in turn spoke to invisible people. She often volunteered to speak to invisible people. She did not care whether scientists supported her or not. People had not believed in Mountain

Guerillas until these were discovered hundreds of years ago. According to his grandmother there could be invisible scientists. She said it was a “hundred percent good idea” (156) to assume that there could be even an invisible Mountain Guerilla scientist.

Arnold’s grandmother supported him in his joining the all whites school at Rearden. She was excited of him meeting new people in Rearden school. She wished she could go to Rearden school with him. This spirit of excitement and curiosity marked her apart from others in the reservation.

She made contacts with the Indians who had participated in these ethnic festivities. All the Indians participating in powwows knew her.

One day she was returning from a mini powwow held at the Spokane Tribal community. She was hit by a vehicle on the road. It was driven by Gerald who was an alcoholic Spokane Indian. The paramedics at the reservation attended her and then brought her to the hospital in Spokane. She died while undergoing an emergency surgery. Her death was due to massive internal injuries. She was magnanimous and kind hearted. The surgeon told Arnold’s father that her last words were “Forgive him” (157). Of course, she was referring to the drunk driver Gerald who killed her. Thus, her last act on this earth was a call for forgiveness, love and tolerance. Had his grandmother not instructed them to forgive Gerald, his father, his mother and he himself would have beaten Gerald to death. The tribal cops of Spokane took Gerald to jail. This incident is an instance of Indians being killed due to alcoholism. His grandmother was a rarest kind of a grandmother in that she had never drunk alcohol in her entire life. She had enough reasons for not consuming alcohol; she liked to have all of her senses in proper working condition while she was living in the world. She was typically a person who enjoyed life to the brim.

Arnold's grandmother was held in high esteem by the Indians. She was a matriarch for their community. Many Indians turned up on the wake held on the third day after her death. Although Arnold was held by the Indians as the one who had betrayed them by joining the all whites school at Rearden, they never expressed this in any way when they came to his house. The Indians kept on pouring into their house during the wake. They let Arnold live in the reservation without any problems. Thus, he has become part of the reservation after the death of his grandmother. The Indians were no longer interested to trouble him as he had already been undergoing pain. He felt great regard for themembers for the members of his community as they had allowed him to spend his time peacefully over there. Even Rowdy who was not on good terms with Arnold since he had left for Reardenschoolalso kept away from troubling him.

Arnold held his grandmother as the greatest Spokane Indian in history. About two thousand Indians and a few whites also attended her funeral. The coffin was set on the football field after it was moved out of the Spokane Tribal Longhouse. People who gathered there were telling lot of stories about her.

There was a vast crowd of people assembled on that field. A white man named Ted was waiting there with a big suit in his hand. He was a billionaire who loved Indians and their art works. He had a vast collection of Indian art forms to his credit including old powwow dance outfits. Afterwards, Ted started narrating the story of a powwow outfit used by an Indian woman dancer.

The powwow dance outfit was kept within his suitcase. This powwow outfit was handed over to him about ten years ago by an Indian. One day he had come to his house in Montana and knocked on his door. That Indian was carrying this exceptionally beautiful woman's dance outfit. The Indian appeared to be in dire straits so that he was compelled to sell it to Ted to meet the medical expenses for his wife. Ted did not believe it and thought that the outfit was a stolen one. Ted hired an anthropologist to find out the source of the dance outfit. Finally, it was found out that the outfit belonged to a woman named Grandmother Spirit.

This statement from Ted was really a shock to all of the Indians gathered overthere. Actually, Ted has come to personally hand over the outfit to the Grandmother Spirit who was none other than Arnold's grandmother. Actually, Ted had set off to meet Arnold's grandmother in order to personally hand over the powwow outfit to her. It was a devastating experience to Ted that the Grandmother Spirit has passed away to the next world before he could reach her house. The Indians including Arnold felt it to be the weirdest experience when Ted finished his speech. Thereupon, Ted opened up his suitcase and took out the outfit which seemed to weigh fifty pounds. He told the gathering that he was ready to part with it to any one of the Grandmother Spirit's children present there. Thereafter, Arnold's mother stepped forward and walked up to Ted. She began to speak to him in a formal and serious tone. She appeared to be as sacred as the English royalty. Ted expressed sorrow for returning the outfit so late. But, on examining the outfit she replied that the Grandmother Spirit was not a powwow dancer. However, she explained that although her mother loved to go to powwows she never danced or owned a powwow dance outfit.

Thus, his mother expressed the view that the outfit possessed by Ted was not of her mother. Moreover, the beadwork in the outfit and its design also were not of Spokane. Besides, no other Indian from the gathering could recognize it to be a Spokane outfit. Rather, his mother expressed her opinion that it looked more Sioux or Oglala. After sometime, Ted packed the outfit into his suitcase and left the place. The Indians kept silent for a while and then they started laughing together. The kind of glorious noise that it produced could never have been heard by Arnold. It was very usual among Indians to mingle both laughter and tears together and this was much of the same for them. They continued to laugh when they lowered her body on the ground. They continued to laugh and when it was covered with dirt on their way back to their lonely houses.

The Indians expressed their love and respect to Arnold's grandmother through frequent laughter. Of course, the death of Arnold's grand mother was the death of this GreatMother Spirit. But laughter and tears were of much importance to the Indians. It represented both life and death to them. Indians are the people who are highly tolerant of any kind of eccentricity in behavior and words. This is explicitly clear in their response to Ted's story. The whites who brought who

brought Christianity into America never exhibited this kind of tolerance of eccentricity. This kind of tolerance to diversity is part of the cultural make up of the age-old Indian spirit.

The behavior and speech of Ted is nothing short of the hype of love that some whites show towards Indians. Matriarchs like Arnold's grand mother are virtually the heads of many of the Indian tribal communities. There is an underlying spirituality in the life of his grandmother. As the matriarchal head of this Spokane Indian community at large, his grandmother represents all that age-old Indian spirit. Her grandmother's position in that Spokane Indian community denotes the level of power that women folk wield in Native American communities.

His grandmother spoke sympathetically of the homeless people. In this we can see how much respect she gives to fellow human beings. Indians like his grandmother believed in the possibility of the existence of the invisible people.

The Spokane Indian community has given highest regard and respect to his grandmother as the matriarch of Great Mother spirit. From the position she occupied in her community we can see how much the women folk enjoyed power in the tribal society. It is they who become the heads of the community. Thus a society which gives utmost respect to the women folk, we can assert, is a healthy society.

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