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FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN (stories-12 to 22)

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THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN
***HEAVEN* (stories-12 to 22)**

Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation is the twelfth story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), a short story collection by Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr. This melancholic story begins with the birth of James, a child who later becomes orphan in a fire of the house. The title of the story itself compares him with Jesus Christ. The experiences of James' foster father while upbringing him from his birth in 1966 to seven years old are narrated.

When the story opens it is common for Indians to hear sirens as reservation area is commonplace for whites to burn things. One day while drinking, Indians hear the sirens because Rosemary Morning Dove's home is in flames. They rush to the scene to save family from the fire. Narrator goes in the house and throws James, a child of Rosemary and Frank Many Horses out of the window. James is picked by other Indians and is fine; only head is injured. And narrator has to adopt James according to Spokane Indian tradition. When narrator goes to visit James' parents before their death ". . . [he] wouldn't be scared of all the white walls and...heard the Indian screams and those can travel forever like all around the world and some-times from a hundred years ago . . .". (112)

This incident gives narrator dare to face the white world without fear. There he listens to the painful cries of hundreds of years of torments and agony. It teaches him to be a part of happiness and sorrow of his tribe, where poverty is inherent and omnipresent among all of the

families. Though all the Indigenous people are of working-class and economically weak there is class distinction on the reservation. It is indicated through the reference of, “. . . Commodity Village where all the really poor Indians live . . .”. (111)

James, unable to speak becomes the ‘religion’ of his alcoholic foster father. He was “. . . waiting for that one moment to cry like it was five hundred years of tears”. (115) It suggests that Indians have suppressed hundreds of years of injustice, were never allowed to speak against it. But now in the form of James, a new born baby, they want to begin a life with own voice and identity. They want to cry from the heart to express their sorrows, are only waiting for a proper time. James, a symbol of traditional Spokane spirituality has come to save Indians. Like Jesus he shows them the path in the worst time because, “. . . [he has] got eyes that are ancient and old and dark like a castle or a lake where turtles go”. (116)

In one of the mornings of 1969, when James is about three years old, he plays basketball with narrator. And the narrator thinks about them as, “. . . warriors roaring against the air and the nets and the clock that didn’t work and our memories and our dreams and the twentieth-century horses we called our legs”. (118) Both, foster father and his son gain the strength of warrior and horse to fight against the whites. They remember their hundreds of years’ old past and they dream to bring it back in the twentieth-century with the help of their distinctiveness in basketball.

At the age of five, though his head bleeds, James does not make a sound. Narrator has to take him to the reservation hospital where white doctors have misconceptions about Natives. They think that Natives do not have intellect and ability to progress in life rapidly. They do not think

the illnesses of Indian people are serious. The reaction of the doctors is observed by narrator,

. . . [They] looked him over and said there was nothing wrong with him and that he's just a little slow developing and that's what the doctors always say and they've been saying that about Indians for five hundred years. (120)

From the early 16th century when the first settlers arrived on the American continent natives were treated as inferior and rarely paid attention. In the 20th century though they provide health services to natives through Indian Health Centers, their attitudes are the same. The narrator's observation about the young Indian generation is opposite to white doctors. The young generation wants to create their identity giving respect to traditional ways of life. They are curious and critic to learn new things. They take great effort to change their life, and come out of colonizer's old images. Native children tell their determination to the Jesus,

. . . to dance and to sing and pound a drum so hard it hurts your ears and . . . [Indian children are] going to be respectful to elders at least the Indian elder and [they are] going to change the world. (120)

The narrator remembers some incidents related to television. Once he sees the scene of Vietnam War on the television screen which underlines the aggressive tendency of white people. Though this story takes place during the time of Vietnam War, the plot of it slightly touches such major incident because for natives Indian issues are more important than any white imperialistic act. The narrator continues that, in the history whites have used very shrewd diplomacy to seize the very existence of Indian people. Before gaining actual victory on the battlefield, they

fractured the psyche of Indians creating inferior complex about their skin color. So he is of the opinion that, "The white people [who] always want to fight someone and they always get the dark-skinned people to do the fighting". (120)

James' father goes through numerous mental disturbances to keep and make him speak. To overcome the stress of it he becomes an addict of alcohol. Once the narrator with James and auntie Suzy Song goes into an A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous), a program to help Indians to overcome alcoholism. It is the real reason behind all the problems of their life. Then they go in World Fair to see the movie where always, "... [they] show the same movies ... the same white guy who almost destroys [Indians'] life and his wife and his children and his job but finally realizes the alcohol is killing him ...". (124)

Here Alexie wants to suggest that Indians should stop blaming whites for every Indian problem. Finally, James speaks in the story. He speaks philosophical truth about the native identity. He tells his father that they only have the right to live for each other and not to die. He shows him the proper path of life, the meaning of life that can be achieved in togetherness.

A Train Is an Order of Occurrence Designed to Lead to Some Result is a story which reveals how alcohol can affect the lives of American Indians. The very title of the story and epigraph are very apt and suitable to the theme of not only this story but also an entire collection. On the reservation, Indian life cut off from the entire world is dipped in the alcohol, an identical trait of Indianness. Like 'train', alcoholic Indian life has some consequent effects which result into the end. Death is the final destination and the rescue from white tormentation. The story begins with the lines from Ray Young Bear.

These are “there is something about / trains,` drinking, and being / an Indian with nothing to lose”. (130)

The story is set on the birthday of Samuel Builds-the-Fire, grandfather of Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Instead of party and presents to go early to work with smile is a gift for him. He showers, shaves and combs his hair into braids to go to work early, because it was “. . . a kind of gift to himself”. (130) In the previous week he was opening his mailbox again and again, expecting greetings from his children. On his birthday he seems happy, excited and goes early to work for half an hour. On the way he notices that, “It [is] a good day: sun, light wind, and small noises like laughter from open car windows and fast-food restaurants”. (131)

Samuel’s joy is compared with the joys of white upper-class people who has cars and enjoy food at restaurant. Samuel, an Indian has to seek satisfaction in the work as a servant. He chants, “Broom, dustpan, sweep, trash can.” (130) On the same day, Samuel is cut off from his job as a maid at motel, by a motel manager saying, “. . . I need to let you go . . . I need to cut back on expenses . . . You’ve been an outstanding employee”. (131) Saddened by this news, in depression Samuel goes in a bar, to drink for the first time, “. . . where all the Indians drank in eight-hour shifts”. (133) There he is served by a bartender who “. . . laughed and had the urge to call the local newspaper . . . [to make news as] *This Injun is going to take his first drink*”. (134)

Several motivating factors are responsible for this change in Samuel. He is unable to deal with the reality of unemployment. He always remained sober in the past because he had thought that “. . . an alcohol would corrupt his stories He knew stories had the power to teach, to show how this life should be lived . . . those stories which could

make their worlds into something better”. (134) And one more reason for not drinking was, “All his life he had watched his brothers and sisters, most of his tribe, fall into alcoholism and surrendered dreams”. (133) A fear of losing the greatness of his stories and his witnessing its vengeance upon the reservation were the reasons of his sobriety.

Samuel, a very good and profound storyteller, is a natural-born leader, understands that people need each other to survive in an often hostile world. He is more imaginative and creative than his grandson. Stories of Samuel were a life for reservation people. They help people to live in an ever changing world, were highly powerful. Samuel's off reservation experience is as sad and lonely, as life on the reservation. Instead of creating a story related to an event, Samuel loses his power of a storyteller to the more isolated and helpless life of Spoken. His becoming an outcast is a symbol of spiritual decline. Samuel, who had never drunk earlier, turns into alcoholic Indian, because of an utter aloneness. In a drunken haze, he accepts the hopelessness and stagnation.

Alcohol is the ultimate answer to sustain the pain of unemployment, the result of hundreds of years' exploitation. In the bar while emptying a lot of glasses he “. . . *understand[s] everything* . . . he wanted to live this way now. With each glass of beer, Samuel gained a few ounces of wisdom, courage. But after a while, he began to understand too much about fear and failure, too . . . a moment when an Indian realizes he cannot turn back toward tradition and that he has no map to guide him toward the future”. (134)

Indians have lost their rich indigenous tradition. Failures of present life make them fearful about future. Here Alexie criticizes Indians for losing utility of stories though it is not their fault. Their stories have been poisoned by the white world. Samuel, a cultural outcast is forced to leave

his community for Spokane, to have company to listen the stories. There he does not get a real audience because stories have lost their mythical and cultural appeal. It suggests that being the best of Indians, Samuel is powerless and is disappearing continuously. Through this story, Alexie suggests that though it is a land of new opportunities, the life of poverty-class reservation Indians do not transforms into a new existence. But worthlessness and desperation are the only results of it. The Indians are always pushed at the bottom of social hierarchy.

Samuel was raised by his grandmother after the death of his parents in a fire. Samuel's children left him just like white kids, after he had taught them everything he could, everything he knew. All his friends have died, and all the younger people have no time for stories. While living alone on the reservation without money and company, he "... felt like the horse must have felt when Henry Ford came along". (135) He lives there in the way of inescapable loneliness and despair. With his children all the people on the reservation, have been affected by the outside world. Then also he does not waste his life like many other members on the reservation. There, in the Spokane he can only find a small studio apartment. He makes it like the inside of the tipi. He made it, to feel it as "... close to home at least". (136) His minimum wage job, at motel was semi respectable when he began, but now it has become a home for drug dealers and prostitutes.

He takes responsibility and deep care of the people of his world or when he sees Indians suffer in the city. When "... sometimes an Indian woman would work out of the motel and that always hurt Samuel more than anything he could ever imagine. In his dreams, he would see his own daughter's face in the faces of the prostitutes". (136) He gives them a little money on paydays, not to work that day. Sometimes they work

anyway, but sometimes they drink coffee at Denny's instead of working. "Those were good days for Samuel". (137) While working at the hotel, he finds the body of young Indian boy of mixed-blood, died of a drug overdose. That tragic event affects him forever:

When the police came and lifted the Indian boy from the bed with a tearing and stretching sound that nearly broke Samuel's eardrums, the stories waiting to be told left and never returned. (137)

The violence and tragedy of the white world destroy his stories. At the end of his birthday, Samuel pushed out of the bar, to stumble in despair onto the railroad tracks laying his head in the path of an oncoming train. The last line of the story is "Sometimes it's called passing out and sometimes it's just pretending to be asleep". (138) It leaves the sense that reservation people choose suicide over this type of survival available to them. Alcohol does not work to solve the problems of his stagnant and hopeless life, but the only final option before him for escape was suicide. Such problems on the reservation are the result of the contamination by Euro-American culture.

In *A Good Story* narrator's mother while quilting pieces together asks why her son, a narrator of the story, writes stories, which show only the negative side of life on the reservation. She asks him to portray the positive aspects of Indian life because she thinks bad things always do not take place only on the reservation. She wishes that, "[He] should write a story about something good . . . Because people should know that good things always happen to Indians, too". (140)

Throughout this collection Alexie tries to tell that there are some positive things about Indian people, which help to survive in the syncretic world. He suggests that the lives of his characters do not always

characterize with hopelessness and stagnation. He conveys that with the help of humor and laughter Indians have survived themselves through the negative side of life. Narrator's mother complains that his stories are filled with too much cries, sorrows, pain etc. but he knows that, "... nobody laughs as much as the people in [his] stories, either". (140)

Then narrator writes one good story in which Uncle Moses has built a house just enough to ensure his survival. He remembers John-John, his nephew just returned from college who tells a story about, "... 99 percent of the matter in the universe is invisible to the human eye". (141) Sitting in the porch of the house Uncle Moses looks across the fields and imagines:

The Indian children would come with half-braids, curiosity endless and essential . . . throwing stones into water, from basketball and basketry . . . from the very beginning. Generation of HUD house, of car wreck and cancer, of commodity cheese and beef . . . carried dreams in the back pockets . . . (142)

Uncle Moses hopes that the next generation of American Indians will bring back the old ways of Indian life to continue it forever. He is hopeful about Indian children that they will bring back the natural life, agriculture, various old skills etc. It will be different from the white urban life of industrialization, motors, buildings, diseases, and wars in the name of progress.

Then Arnold, one of the boys, who had gone to play basketball, comes to see Uncle Moses secretly. He, a pale-skinned impressive basketball player was teased by his classmates. Looking him Uncle Moses thinks that, "[Indian children] are all given something to compensate for what [Indians] have lost". (143) It is the major theme of

this story. Whites have exchanged something minor in place of something precious with Indian people. They destroyed the very settled life of Indians and took valuable things to complete the greed of insatiable European mind. In return Indians are given a very few worthless things such as basketball, alcohol, HUD houses on the reservation area etc. To forget self esteem and beg at the door of whites is the only way, left before Indians.

Uncle Moses makes friendship with Arnold and watches him while playing basketball. He recognizes that Arnold has an improbable gift of basketball. Arnold asks Uncle Moses to tell a 'good' story who tells Arnold 'this very' story. In this story, Alexie has used circular plot structure which confuses the reader as there are stories within a story. At the end of this story, there is a 'finishing' in which narrator's mother starts singing a song sung by Uncle Moses.

In Native American culture and literature stories have great importance. Stories pass Native history and tradition from one generation to another. The role of storytelling is not only to keep collective memories alive, but also to survive their identity from the assaults of Eurocentric culture. In this story Alexie asks European Americans to respect, value, and help to maintain Native culture.

In *The First Annual All-Indian Horseshoe Pitch and Barbecue* where Alexie criticizes the habit of Indian people to blame whites for every small problem on the reservation. They depend and expect change in their life only from white people. He expects that instead of raising fingers at white people to hide their incompetence; Indians should create their identity on their own. He expects sympathy and reconciliation between two races, Native Americans and European Americans. Like a

poem, this story leaps from a linear sequence to episodic beginning, "*Someone forgot the charcoal; blame the BIA*". (145)

After a long gap, the next sentence is about the survival of Indian identity, a major and recurring theme in all the works of Alexie. He writes about the Indians' views and emotions about their existence and white colonization. In the reservation carnival an unnamed narrator buys an old piano, and plays the composition of Bela Bartok. Indians identify its music with their tragic history, because, ". . . after the beautiful dissonance and implied survival, the Spokane Indians wept, stunned by this strange and familiar music". (146) Alexie suggests that such type of shared experience or feeling of familiarity is the key to overcome historic grudges between whites and natives.

Then the line, "There is something beautiful about . . .". (146) repeated at the beginning of four paragraphs in series, focuses on a barbecue where Victor plays a piano. He did not play it until the day of the barbecue because he feels that there is ". . . a good day to die and a good day to play the piano". (146) Piano, a symbol of a white world is played by an Indian on a good day, a carnival festival where whites and Indians come together. It conveys that Indians want to develop a new kind of harmonious identity with the white world. Simon, one of the friends of narrator tells the same when he wins the storytelling contest at horseshoe pitch. He tells, ". . . basketball should be [Indians'] new religion, [because] A ball bouncing on hardwood sounds like a drum". (147) Here Indian drum and white basketball's mixed sound creates new rhythm in Indian white relationship.

The descriptions of small things regarding the barbecue are highlighted in the story. The narrator sees beauty in the black hair of an Indian boy with various natural things. Then he asks that, was there any

coincidence that, “. . . basketball was invented just one year after the Ghost Dance fell at Wounded Knee?”. (147) The event of Ghost Dance, a last uprising of Indians, is followed by the massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890. It suppressed the voice of Indians permanently and initiated the loss of American Indian culture. It is followed by the invention of basketball, a popular game in both Native and American community. This incident is very symbolic. Though basketball is originated to take place or give outlet to war aggressiveness of both the community, it has tried to bring them closer.

There is a series of questions in the end, each beginning with “Can you hear the dreams . . .?”. (148) Narrator talks about how Indians could hear those dreams in the campfire. In white-native conflict they were against each other’s dreams. Some positive things about Indian people and their world are told at the end of the story. A white mother gives birth to the child of red father. The child is not christianized after any race or community because, “Both sides of this baby are beautiful” (148) is very important.

After the long and tense relationship between two cultures the child brings them together. It symbolizes the union of two cultures. Here Alexie gives a message that, there is a beauty not only in the unity, but in the diversity also, and things of both the world are appreciable. He has given a totally different message than the story *Somebody Kept Saying Powwow* where Junior feels that his child is divided between two cultures.

The story *Imagining the Reservation* deals with the hope, dreams, bitterness, and the possibilities of existence. It deals with keeping Native identifies in the harsh realities of reservation life. The very first lines from Lawrence Thornton make it clear the theme of the story. These lines

are, "We have to believe in the power of imagination / Because it's all we have, and ours is stronger / than theirs". (149)

Alexie thinks that reservation can be empowered through imagination and humor. After all the belongings had been taken away, imagination is the only belief remained in the hands of Indians. It helps them to bring the picture of happy Native life in place of sad and idle Indian present. At the beginning of this story there is a series of rhetoric questions which come close to poetic prose. Alexie tries to transcend present by imagining hypothetically about history. He asks to imagine if the Jesus Christ was a have Spokane Indian. He makes reader imagine about how historical events could occurred differently then. He asks,

Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C. . . . Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean. (149-50)

Indians are ruled by whites from the very arrival of Columbus, a first invader on the land of Native people. Alexie imagines that Indians would be in better condition if they had been able to defend him. Urban Indians would not have lived in the one-room apartment on the reservation and have got enough food. At present they have to do work of lower status because they are snatched of all the possessions. And they are kept in miserable condition to rotten in the wastages, where ". . . the body forgets the rhythm of survival". (150) He feels that an equation for survival is "Survival = Anger X Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation". (150) Reservation situation creates anger about whites in the mind of Indians. Alexie conveys that in such situations imagination is the only defense and means of survival. It is the only weapon to support morally while fighting against the obliteration of

identity. Every element on the reservation dreams about lyrics and waits for the drumbeat.

Narrator uses the 7-11 stories as a location of his imagination and dreams, where he feels that he is surrounded by 500 years of lies. Then he relates some incidents of reservation life. He remembers when once he worked as a cashier at a 7-11, he was robbed of all his possessions and left to wait for rescue. Then narrator tells about a visionary Indian child who asks to imagine and reads the futures of all the Indians touching their hands. He asks the narrator to break the mirror and tape the pieces of it to his body. He is doubted by one of the Indians that he is not some medicine man come back to change their lives.

While looking *The Tonight Show* on the television, in the dark the narrator with his father tells stories about the food they wanted. They only had potatoes to eat so they would colour it to feel that they eat different fruits. Alexie tells that even to imagine about proper food is also difficult for Indians. He believes the power of imagination because instead of it, "Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision? . . . I imagined the potatoes grew larger, filled my stomach, reserved the emptiness . . . the food we wanted the most". (151)

Here Alexie challenges the notion of Indianness created by Hollywood movies. He provides several clues about what means by 'real' Indians. He tries to empower Indians though they are enslaved by the language of colonizers. He asks,

How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt? . . . [and] a new life when a pocketful of quarters weighs our possibilities down? (152)

Though to imagine is a temporary relief from the pain of being lost, it is also becoming difficult, because English, a language of whites has terminated hundreds of indigenous languages. If language, an expression of the soul and very existence of a person is refused then the identity of a person is also denied.

The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor is seen through the eyes of Jimmy Many Horses who is dying from cancer. He writes letters to his wife on the stationary that reads "From the Death Bed of James Many Horses III," even though he actually writes them on his kitchen table. This story is his reflection on the history of his marriage to his wife, Norma and how she does not understand his humorous attitude.

James is on the deathbed. While in the HUD house he longs for a place where he belongs. Returning after it he feels, ". . . it's good to be back home. Where I belong". (155) There he lived with Norma until the day tells her that he has terminal cancer throughout his entire body. He makes a game of it by describing it as the size of a baseball. Such humor helps him to cope with difficult situations. Though his humorous nature fastens their separation, he realizes that, ". . . laughter saved Norma and [him] from pain, too. Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds". (164) at the end of his life laughter rescues him from stress and makes him hopeful about life.

When once he does not take her mother's death seriously Norma becomes thoroughly upset with him. She feels that he is dehumanizing and insensitive. In anger instead of fighting with him she heads off to the Powwow Tavern, where they had met first to dance. His humorous behavior has taught her tolerance. He follows her to apologize for making too many jokes about his cancer and to reach there before she finds another dance partner. She threatens him that she will leave him if he

makes one more joke. But he cannot stop himself from making one last joke and Norma does not stop to keep her promise.

He remembers that once their car was stopped by Washington State patrolman and started blaming them for fake reasons such as, reckless driving, resisting arrest, and threatening an officer with physical violence. Norma replies him sarcastically:

I'll just tell everyone how respectful you were of our Native traditions, how much you understood- about the social conditions that lead to the criminal acts of so many Indians. I'll say you were sympathetic, concerned, and intelligent.
(166)

Norma's reply is very apt and the message behind the writing of this book. Alexie wants respect and sympathy to understand the present social condition of Native people. They make fun of police officer because it is the effective weapon in despair. Norma is a 'warrior', who drives a hundred miles to visit tribal elders in a nursing home in Spokane. She says that, "Every one of our elders who dies takes a piece of our past away . . . that hurts more because I don't know how much of a future we have". (167) Norma feels sorry for vanishing Indians in the United States of America. With decreasing population their culture is dying. She is doubtful about the future of American Indian identity, so she is trying her best to preserve it.

At the end there is reconciliation in their relationship. She joins James again, to help him in death. She abandons her lover; a man with whom she was living after James because he was too much serious. And ". . . because making fry bread and helping people die are the two last things Indians are good at". (170) Norma's helping people die suggests native history of bloodshed in past centuries.

This story deals with the emotional pain through humor. For James, only jokes are at hand to recover and continue the painful life of Natives. In this story, Alexie tells that when imagination fails humor comes to the help of Indians. But sometimes it can be a double-edged sword like this story which has both destructive and transforming possibilities. It is a tool which helps to survive in devastating situation. It makes misery bearable and helps Indians to restore pride and identity.

The story *Indian Education* talks about Victor, a reservation child and his experiences from first grade to the twelfth grade, at the off reservation farm school. This story chronologically contains most important incidents from the each grade. It is an autobiographical account of reservation boy's schooling and life experiences. It is "... a true (and truer) account of [Alexie's] public school days. [He] still have nightmares ...". (xx)

In the first grade, Victor remembers how other Indian boys chased, pushed him down and buried in the snow until he could not breathe. His glasses were stolen and tossed over his head beyond his reach. He has to face taunts and violence. He was always beaten by Natives and non-Natives until he fights back. When a boy named Frenchy SiJohn threw snowballs at him, "... the little warrior in [him] roared to life that day and knocked Frenchy to the ground ... he wasn't the warrior. [Victor] was". (172)

Here Alexie wants to explain that Indian blood is filled with bravery and adventure that keeps patience or tolerates to some extent. Victor tells here that violence is prevalent on the reservation and Indians have to face it from childhood. He describes the cruelty of other kids, "I was always falling down ...". His Indian names were Junior Falls Down, BloodyNose, Steal-His-Lunch, Cries-Like-a-White-Boy etc. though he

never had seen a white boy cry. Such names are given to Indians by whites to hurt and humiliate them.

In the second grade, he experiences racism. Betty Towle, a missionary teacher treats him cruelly. She thinks that she needs to teach him respect. She wants him to apologize for everything, which Victor does not understand. She makes him stay in recess straight, eagle-armed with books in each hand. Once she gives him a test designed for junior high students and makes him eat crumpled papers of spelling test. She sends a letter to his parents asking either to cut his braids or not to come to class. She mutters before his parents as, 'Indians' for three times without capitalization. Here in this story a teacher who shapes the future of every nation is destroying the future of particular community.. Indian children are insulted, tortured, punished cruelly to forbid educationally. They are forced to look like whites and are not kept any option without it.

In the third grade, his traditional Native American art career begins and ends with the very first portrait when one of the teachers confiscates and intercepts it. He alone waits for the punishment and Alexie writes that he is 'still waiting'. Victor remembers, in that year his father drank a gallon of vodka for a day and his mother began two hundred different quilts but never finished any. His mother worked more when his father started drinking more. In the fourth grade, another teacher Mr. Schluter encourages him to become a doctor and asks him to help to heal the tribe. Like this collection the whole story is Alexie's off reservation schooling experience. He writes,

[his mother] would have been deliriously happy if [he had] become a messianic doctor or . . . and saved the tribe. In a capitalistic sense, that's what the tribe needed (and still needs). (xii)

In the fifth grade, Victor picks and makes a shot of basketball for the first time. He feels that all the possibilities of mathematics and geometry are in his hand. While fighting with Randy one of the white kids, he learns “. . . the most valuable lesson about living in the white world: Always throw the first punch”. (176) It teaches that Indians should take initiatives to defense themselves. It is a strategy of existence, especially for weaker section of society. Such technique reminds Darwin's theory 'Survival of the Fittest'.

Then Victor remembers a kiss with a white girl in the seventh grade. He tells that “. . . I felt the goodbyes I was saying to my entire tribe . . .”. (176) this incident can be interpreted on various levels. It represents the cultural interaction. After this incident Victor is banished on the reservation. He feels that he has betrayed his tribe and has abandoned his culture. At this small age, he develops a strong ethnic identity. It symbolizes that Indians are being separated from their own culture which is being erased from within as well as outside. It shows that Indians broke the ties of community and family when they leave the reservation.

In the eighth grade, Victor listens nervous whispers of anorexia and bulimia and sounds of white girl's forced vomiting. It remembers him reservation where his mother stood in the line, to get commodities and canned beef that the dogs would not eat. He becomes jealous and angry and compares it with the reservation plight. Victor wishes to say that, "Give me your lunch if you're just going to throw it up . . .". (177) This event tells that there is an opposite situation in the native and white world. On the reservation, a community at the bottom of social hierarchy, Victor becomes happy to have food, whereas in the higher class like white a girl vomits after too much eating.

In the ninth grade, after Victor is diagnosed as diabetic, Chicano teacher replies, “. . . these Indian kids start drinking real young”. (178) It suggests that though reservation life is alcoholic white have misconceptions about it. Whites treat Native children badly and expect them as alcoholic addict. Sometimes at an early age children have to become the prey of parents’ addiction and genetic diseases like diabetic. On the same day, Victor receives a driver’s license and Willy Jim; an Indian kills himself driving his car into a pine tree. Indians, to find out why he killed himself “. . . look in the mirror, see the history of [their] tribe, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, [they] understand completely”. (178) Indians had started a prosperous journey in the history but later it is blocked by subjugation by whites and the hindrance of alcohol. So it is natural for Willy Jim to bring final destruction by accident.

In the eleventh grade, Victor was the only actual Indian ever to play for the farm town high school, yet it was nicknamed as ‘Indians’. When they lose there is a headline in the newspaper as ‘INDIANS LOSE AGAIN’. Alexie says that it is a stereotypical representation or opinion about Indians in the media. It conveys the tendency of whites to blame Indians for white failures. He says that such things continuously happen to hurt Indians. In the twelfth grade Victor has achieves awards, accomplishments, and scholarships and proves that Indians are not less clever than whites if opportunities are given. His act of growing hair long predicts that he will preserve and continue the identical marks of Native American tradition.

Victor is more cautious about the future of Indian identity. So instead of feeling happy for the past, he remains stoic before photographers and look toward future. Whereas bright students on the

reservation frightened to look at the future, laugh at looking towards the back tradition. At the end, Victor wishes to reunite his reservation high school friends. Here the hope of the bright future of Indian identity becomes stronger. In this story, Alexie suggests that the Indian education is wasted and less intellectual. It is filled with prejudice and racism and of no or very little use.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven is the title story of this collection. *Lone Ranger* and *Tonto* are the symbols of white American and Native American identity respectively. The title itself suggests that there are various types of conflicts throughout the story between narrator, a native and whites for power. While struggling to achieve a sense of equality narrator tries to bridge the gap between the two cultures. It focuses on the violent Indian-white relation. Narrator's relationship with his white girlfriend and his jobs at various places are interwoven throughout the story. The predicted failure of their relationship is accounted in the story.

In the story narrator leaves the reservation to seek new opportunities in Seattle, a city in Washington, near the reservation land. Narrator comes there in search of a better quality of life. While living there with his white girlfriend he feels ambiguous. He lives a life of frustration and self caught up in a vast city. He feels dislocated and has to face suspicion. It is one of the two stories from this collection in which characters live off the reservation. But their city experiences are equal to poverty and despair of the Spokane reservation. They do not survive there.

This story is a series of past anecdotes told by unnamed narrator. Narrator remembers that he used to work at a 7-11 in Seattle like the narrator of the story *Imagining the Reservation* who was robbed once.

Once the narrator of this story goes to the Third Avenue 7-11 in Seattle at 3 in the morning and takes the advantage of the racist fear of the clerk. They play a cat-and-mouse game or battle for dominance. The clerk looks at him suspiciously as if narrator is going to rob the place. Because narrator says, “He knew this dark skin and long, black hair of [narrator] was dangerous. [Narrator] had potential”. (183) It suggests that such type of encounters take place daily between Natives and non-Natives. The narrator describes their interaction. “‘Just getting a Creamsicle.’ I said after a long interval. It was a sick twist to pull on the guy . . . I wanted to whistle low and menacingly but I never learned to whistle”. (183)

Narrator thinks that a white cashier is also misplaced and lonely. So at the home alone, he would have been flipping through channels. Narrator compares the look of 7-11 clerk, as watching “. . . so he could describe to the police later” to the way, he used to look at his white girlfriend. He says that the relationship between two people is happy or breaking can be recognized by how they look at each other. His philosophy of relationship is, “When one person starts to look at another like a criminal, then the love is over. It’s logical”. (182)

Narrator’s turbulent relationship with his white girlfriend relates with the title of the story. The ideal native-white relationship is not possible in the real world. They even fistfight in the ideal and imaginary world of heaven. Here Alexie explains that reservation Indians’ ethnicity is not respected but they are seen as criminals. There is racial discrimination and the gap between two races is widening. Alexie illustrates this incident with humor and sorrow. Like James Many Horses of the story *An Approximate Size of my Favorite Humor* narrator of this story faces racism humorously.

Narrator remembers that his white girlfriend used to become afraid of him when he was getting angry too often. To spend time away from her, he would work in the graveyard shift as a cashier. He would often get lost and feel 'lost' in life. Once when he ends up in a nice residential neighborhood, the police pull him over. His answer to the police's question, "Where he is supposed to be?" is, "I knew there were plenty of places I wanted to be, but none where I was supposed to be." (182) The police officer warns narrator to be careful where he drives. Because he thinks that the narrator makes people nervous, and does not fit in the profile of the neighborhood. The narrator wants to tell him that, "[He] didn't really fit the profile of the country . . .". but he knows that it would get him into more trouble. Here narrator develops conflict with a person in power. The feeling that he is displaced in the city life and excluded from mainstream American society makes him angry.

Narrator remembers that sometimes he and his white girlfriend would fight at nights so bad. He would jump in his car and drive all the night to search, ". . . something familiar . . . looking for anything [he] recognized". (182) Their arguments were as damaging as a fist. And her words were more painful than the fists of Muhammad Ali, the world famous bull fighter. The narrator and his girlfriend represent tense relationship between Native Americans and white Americans. The word 'fist' mentioned in the title story is apt and appropriate. The word 'fistfight' appears in other stories such as *Witnesses*, *Secret and Not*, about Thomas and Victor in *This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona* and about Victor's uncles in *Every Little Hurricane*.

Narrator remembers that in Seattle, off the reservation, his crazy dreams would become nightmares. In one of them his romance with his white girlfriend starts the war between whites and Indians. In this dream

he is a minor war chief, and his white girlfriend is the wife of a missionary, who catches them while fucking secretly in barn and shots narrator. The narrator while dying sees,

. . . [his] tribe learned of the shooting and attacked the whites all across the reservation . . . Whites killing Indians and Indians killing whites . . . Other tribes arrived on the horseback to continue the slaughter of whites, and the United States Cavalry rode into battle . . . Three mounted soldiers played polo with a dead Indian woman's head. (186)

White and natives see each other as an enemy. In the dream also they try to banish the other one. Narrator thinks that such nightmares are the products of his anger and imagination. But later he reads more brutal accounts of that kind of evil in the old West. It indicates that the brutal mentality of whites is the same as it was in the early period of settlement. Through such atrocities against Indians, Alexie suggests that there has not been any cultural progression. In another dream narrator wakes in terror and leaves Seattle in the middle of the night. He breaks his relation with his white girlfriend and returns to home, Spokane Indian Reservation. His family was expecting him back since the day he left for Seattle. Because they knew, as an old Indian poet had said that, “. . . Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there”. (187) narrator of this story is one of the two characters from this collection, who goes to the city but does not fully survive. Here it is underlined that Indians cannot exist in the urban area or off the reservation.

Narrator, who is a former college student, is supposed special and smart on the reservation. He is the new kind of warrior. He is expected to rise above the rest of the reservation like an eagle. But the loss of the future becomes clear when at the reservation, narrator flips through

television channels for some weeks. He does not know what to do with the rest of his life. He considers that “. . . for almost any other Indian in the country, that would have been a perfectly fine answer”. (187-188) Alexie here presents an ironic picture of the American Indian dream. Indians are forced to become a new kind of warrior on the off reservation land, which was once restricted for Indians. They leave reservation life to rise above the oppressive existence of it; they do it but only for a very short period.

Narrator starts playing basketball again though he was, “. . . out of shape from drinking and sadness . . .”. (188) Though initially he ignores his mother's pleas to find a job, later does a compromise with himself and the world outside the reservation. He leaves the stagnant life of the reservation for a clerical job in Spokane but when he loses a basketball game to white BIA chief's son. At the job while speaking on the phone he wonders that “. . . if the people on the other end of the line know that I'm Indian and if their voices would change if they did know”. (189) Here narrator is paralyzed by the realization that Indians are trapped in the present. Whites expect him to be a criminal or alcoholic, and Indians want him to succeed. He starts living a meaningful life, less driven by expectations. He says,

These days, living alone in Spokane, I wished I lived closer to the river, to the falls where ghosts of salmon jump. I wish I could sleep . . . lie quietly in the dark . . . I know how all my dreams end anyway. (190)

He longs for the past i.e. Spokane river, the ghosts of salmon, mother earth etc. Very near to his roots he starts living a life of fulfillment and peace. He is tries to achieve or come close to a stable

family and communal identity. Hi dreams are clear now which promise him future.

The story *Family Portrait* begins and ends with the same paragraph beginning with, “The television was always loud, too loud, until every . . .”. (191) It describes the worsening influence of popular culture especially television on Indian family life. Because “. . . every conversation was distorted, fragmented” (191) by it. So instead of conversation Junior, the protagonist of the story remembers only the television in detail. It diverts the attention of Indians from their plight and makes them lethargic. Like a drug, it gulps their voices and identities and creates distances between them.

Junior, remembers history of his family and race and remembers “. . . the nightmare about the thin man in a big hat who took the Indian children away from their parents. He came with scissors to cut hair and a locked box to hide all the amputated braids”. (194) It reminds Carlisle Indian School, a first off-reservation Boarding School, in Pennsylvania in the history of Native American people. The destructive effects of five centuries of colonization on Indian youth are revealed here. During which children, of both race, full-blood and mixed were taken from their homes and ‘civilized’ according to Euro-American standards. All the remnants of traditional Indian identity were nearly wiped out. Children were denied to speak their language, wear their clothes or pray to their Gods. They were assimilated imperfectly to lose their voices and histories. They found themselves between two opposing worlds. They no longer belonged to the old world. And in the new world they were immigrants, trying to fit in.

Victor remembers that his brothers and sisters would sniff gas from the exhaust pipe. They would scrape all the food that dropped off their

plates during dinner into a pile in the center of the table. Then they would place their teeth against the edge of the table and scrape all the food into their mouths. He remembers,

Our parents don't remember that happening, and our sisters cry out, "No, no, we were never that hungry!"

Still, my brother and I cannot deny the truth of our story. We were there. Maybe hunger informs our lives. (193)

Through this dark funny and tragic incident Alexie shows the extreme poverty of reservation life. Such level of poverty intensifies oppression and marginalization of Indigenous people. Victor remembers how his drunken father was stumbled down the stairs. The other Indians dance ". . . under wigs and between unfinished walls, through broken promises and around empty cupboards". (194-195) Alexie presents that economically Indians are at the very low rank. On the reservation they are hungry for better food, houses, and a better way of life. Indian people and their life in poverty and alcoholism are entangled to each other. It is as if inherent and inseparable from their life.

Near the end of the story Victor declares that, "This is how we find our history, how we snap the photograph at the precise moment . . .". (197) At the end of the story Alexie makes aware about the effects of popular culture on Indian identity. They remember their familial and communal system of sharing. Forgetting about white popular culture of modern times "[They] stared across the room at each other, waited for the conversation . . .". (198)

In *Somebody Kept Saying Powwow* Norma is a 'cultural guard' and role model of the reservation, who ". . . watch[es] for those of [Indians] that were so close to drowning". (199) She looks after drug-abusing and poverty-stricken Indians on the reservation. She is a female heroine in the

white-dominated reservation. In this story Junior Polatkin narrates his relation with Norma. Junior, about her frying bread at the powwow stand tells that, "Sometimes it feels like our tribe is dying a piece of bread at a time. But Norma, she was always trying to save it . . .". (199)

Vanishing of food, particularly fry bread at the powwow is linked with the vanishing Indian tradition and culture. With the death of old people such 'good' things of Indian identity are vanishing day by day. And lifeguards of Indian identity such as Norma are trying to save it, though sometimes in vain. Fry bread is also a sign of poverty. In the tragic circumstances of Indian community, characters live without proper nourishment. Junior remembers that in one of the incidents Norma, a deep caretaker of Indian culture stopped Victor from beating Thomas Builds-the-Fire. She was reporting news for tribal newspaper. When Junior wins basketball game for Wellpinit Redskins, she addresses him as, 'true identity', 'Crazy Horse', and 'Warrior Scale'. Junior's basketball skill brings her close to the Indian lives. She compares him with the great Indian warrior Crazy Horse who fought against whites to save Indian identity.

Norma shakes hands with Junior loosely with fingers as only Indians do, and does not shake hands like that tight grips of whites to prove something. She teaches Junior that Indians are the most sensitive people on the planet. They are more sensitive than animals, because when they watch something happening, they become a part of it. According to her everything matters. Indians love to listen to her speech which is full with wisdom. She wants her own kids to make her own tribe. She is the best dancer, good basketball player, can ride a horse and does not drink or smoke. Once Junior at the Powwow Tavern dances with Norma whole the night and dreams about her a hundred years ago. It reminds Junior that

old Indian tradition is alive and continues, only because of lifeguards like Norma who always has been trying to save it.

Junior and Lester Falls Apart love Norma. But on one of the strange days, she forgives Junior. Though she is slightly older than Victor, he calls her as a grandmother out of respect. Victor thinks that he might have a crush on her and dreams about her. Though she does not believe it, she hopes that his dreams about her will become true. Forgetting Junior she marries to James Many Horses. Before her marriage there is a rumor about Norma's homosexuality. Victor Says, ". . . even though [their] tribe has assimilated into homophobia. [He] mean, a person has to have magic to assert their identity without regard to all the bullshit, right?". (203) Norma sustains and inherits the values of a particular community. And it is most important than anything else.

When Junior lives with a white woman in Seattle, to attend college he feels 'gone from the reservation' and he loses half of him. Junior comes back from the college, city, cable television and delivered pizza when his relationship with white girlfriend falls apart. Such modern things of white world attract him initially, but for a short time. When Norma asks him about a bad act he did in the past, he tells her the story of ganging up with white boys in college to beat up a returned prisoner. She becomes angry and calls him another Pete Rose, a league basketball player, always known for an evil thing. Later she forgives him. Here Norma finds similarity between present Indian evil acts with historical one.

In this story television is used to explain different events in Victor's life. He starts a car in the cold winter with his father, who describes his first television show. During various television shows, Victor provides snippets of family history. When his family watches the

television, so loud it distorts their conversations. The same kind of distortion takes place when they remember their past. This story shows how his family pieces together their family history from the various television shows. Denise Low in *American Indian Quarterly* refers to Alexie's numerous references of popular cultures such as television shows, 7-eleven stores, and baseball celebrities like Pete Rose. Low writes in her review of the collection that, ". . . [it] could not have been written during any other period of history". (1) Here she refers to Native Americans' constant renegotiation for identity among popular culture.

Norma asks Junior about his off reservation experience. To Norma's question, "What's it like out there?" Junior replies, "It's like a bad dream you never wake up from . . . foot wedged into a steam grate . . . while the white people are laughing". (1993, 207) In city Junior feels that he is standing completely still on an escalator or stuck in revolving doors or an elevator between floors. He knows that cities are very dangerous for Indians to survive. There they have to face various types of difficulties and discriminations. It denies any opportunity of success and forces them towards edge. They feel helpless and empty without action.

Experiences of the reservation people are not positive in the city because there they lose freedom. It gives comfort to whites who fear from 'uncontained' Indians. In this story Junior cannot exist off the reservation. The stereotypes such as the inter-racial relationships never workout between Indians and whites are found. Indians are incapable to deal with the white 'civilization'. The situation of Indian verses white and reservation verses city is described.

In this story as in other stories, the quest for a Native American cultural identity is a major theme. The Indian society is catch between two worlds. One world is of cable television and fancy cars of the modern

America. It attracts them, but there they feel embarrassed and out of home. On the other hand, they face a mixed nostalgia for the values, heritage, and traditions of thousands of years. Junior's son from a white woman of Seattle is a symbol of the syncretic world. He feels distant, at least from half of his child "... because the city had him during the week and every other weekend. The reservation only got him for six days a month". (207) He sees his son only six days a month. This division of time stops two different worlds from reconciliation.

The phenomenon of how alcoholism has become a cultural ritual on the reservation life is explained in this story. The tribal ties still exist only because of alcohol, the strangest thing, because "A sober Indian has infinite patience with a drunk Indian . . .". (204) The link between alcoholism and poverty is the aspect of the Native community. Alexie consciously has presented this problem as a matter of fact.

Witnesses, Secret and Not, the final story of the collection, represents many themes and symbols of the book. The issues such as white-Indian relationships, alcoholism, personal responsibility, death, disappearances, and the warm bond of the family are explored effectively. In this story Victor talks about turning at thirteen and then spending every year until he is twenty-five years old. He tries to identify what it means to be thirteen and what it means to be Indian. In this story Victor accompanies his father to the Spokane Police Department to get interrogated annually by Secret Witness Program about the disappearance of Jerry Vincent, who had disappeared ten years earlier. In this story, Victor is fictional self of Sherman Alexie, who writes,

And just like the father-son team in "Witnesses, Secret and Not," my father and I once traveled to Spokane because the police wanted to talk to him about a long-missing and

presumed Dead Indian man. And yes, my father knew who killed and buried that man, as do most of the people on my reservation. The police know, too, but they can't make a case against the killer. (xxi)

The detective of the Spokane Police Department asks his father that if Vincent had been his friend, his father replies, "He still is". (222) His father was a friend with the Jerry Vincent at one time. Victor's father was not surprised for Vincent's disappearance. Because, "He wasn't the first one to like that . . . All those relocation programs sent reservation Indians to the cities, and sometimes they just got swallowed up". (212) Many Indians had disappeared at one time, or another because of the various Indian relocation programs. They sent Indians to disappear in the vastness of the city to lose their identity.

In the Spokane Police Department Victor and his father deny candy, given by Detective Clayton to Victor because both are diabetic. This incident changes their thinking and living, is reflected in the returning journey. Victor's father answers to his curiosity that, "I get called about once a year, you know? And I always tell them the same thing. Yes, I was with Jerry that night . . . I just know the story because every Indian knows the story". (214) The police also know but they call Victor's father to give more trouble. Police treat them with little respect, and call them for little reason. Victor and his father required a long and dangerous journey of icy roads to reach there.

On the trip, while discussing about those who have died and disappeared into the cities, they leave unremarked a dangerous near-accident on the ice. They give a couple of dollars to Jimmy Shit Pants, a drunken Indian and left him 'to make his own decisions'. For them instead of their own life and personal problems, community is most

important, which is vanishing day by day. They try to save it in their capacity by giving a small amount of money. On their journey, Victor's father tells him that, in one of the accidents he did not get punishment, though he was guilty of killing a white. Because he was sober and a white man was drunk and, "They'd never heard of a sober Indian getting in a car wreck". (218) It is a stereotypical image of drunken and white Indian.

At last both return home without arrestment to join their strong and happy family. At the dinner table Victor's father "... nearly cried into his food". (223) Victor's father's cry remembers that such types of experiences are witnessed by Native Americans throughout the history. The major characters of this story are trapped in a tradition. Michael E. Kaufman writes, "Native Americans feel that their failures have been imposed on them by circumstance, but . . . also feel responsible for their failures". (95) Their central question still exists about identity is, how do we live? "[Victor] had to find out what it meant to be Indian, and there ain't no self-help manuals for that". (211)

Thus, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is a first full-length work of fiction by Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr. It is about the replacement of Native cultures such as fishing, oral storytelling traditions and powwows by dominant white culture like cable television, drugs, and pizza etc. Different indigenous nations with their tribes and cultures are controlled or replaced by whites through various institutions such as BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs), Tribal Council, Reservation Area, HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development), HHs (Department of Health and Human Services) and cities etc. Nearly nothing happens in this collection. Most of the characters are often seen sitting on the porch of HUD houses. They are trapped by genetic diseases such as diabetes, alcoholism, and self-loathing. For them reservation hurricanes like

poverty, alcoholism, abandonment, empty and static reservation life, white-native clash are less destructive than cultural loss. At the back cover of second edition (2005) *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is summarized appropriately,

Vividly weaving memory, fantasy, and stark reality to paint a portrait of life in and around the Spokane Indian reservation, this book introduces some of Alexie's most beloved characters . . . raised on humiliation and government-issue cheese, and yet filled with passion and affection, myth and charm. Against a backdrop of alcohol, car accidents, laughter, and basketball, Alexie depicts the distances between Indians and whites, reservation Indians and urban Indians, men and women, and most importantly, modern Indians and the traditions of the past.

Among all the stories '*Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation*', '*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*', and '*Witnesses, Secret and Not*' are longest and fully developed achievements of Alexie. In these stories he achieves the moments of cathartic comic relief though his stories are mixed with pathos and cruelty. There is anger, pain, fantasy, humor, and satire in these stories. After the loss of everything Indians had, only imagination is left to create hope, with the help of which lost past can be brought back. Alexie like Samuel, one of the two main narrating characters, is a writer whose stories possess, ". . . the power to teach, to show how this life should be lived . . . [or] at the very least, he could tell funny stories that would make each day less painful". (134)

Thus, Alexie in almost all the stories of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* addresses the history of Native American

people and how identity is denied to them by mainstream American society. During the last five centuries all their possessions were taken gradually and they were made powerless until they lost their identity. All the stories are haunted by what has already happened hundreds of years ago. There is a struggle for finding a self-identity within their culture. It sheds light more on what it means to live in the United States of 21st century. In most of the stories Alexie, an 'independent' and 'rebellious' author for whom, ". . . being Indian is the primary determinant of his identity . . ." ask a question of ethnic boundaries. (Grassian 7)

This collection teaches that Indians have a way of surviving. In all the stories, Alexie counts the losses of Native American tradition. It portrays that the real Indians only exist in the tribal folklore. They are made vulnerable by white culture's relentless sign systems. Segregated and misrepresented, they fight to achieve a sense of authenticity. The fractured stories inside stories emphasize the desperate need of search for meaning. Kenneth Millard in *Contemporary American Literature* writes, ". . . [it]establishes the reservation in terms of a community of shared hardship where stories of survival help to protect Indians from erosion and disappearance". (2)