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Intergenerational Trauma: A Look at Sherman Alexie's Child Characters

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Intergenerational Trauma: A Look at Sherman Alexie’s Child Characters

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The cyclical nature of poverty is not questioned. The cyclical nature of abuse is easy to spot. What about the cyclical nature of pain and trauma? Can suffering travel? Can an individual be born into trauma like someone is born into poverty? Is it deeper than that? This essay takes a look at the very real
cyclical nature of trauma within a few of Sherman Alexie’s works. Alexie uses child-characters to expose intergenerational trauma and suffering through the intolerance they experience. The characters that will be examined are Jonah from “The Sin Eaters” (a short story within *The Toughest Indian in The World*, 2000), John Smith from *Indian Killer* (1996), and Zits/Michael from *Flight* (2007). All three of these Native American children are put through traumatic experiences that stem from their ancestry. Child characters experience great suffering to demonstrate the negative impact that intergenerational trauma has on the perpetuation of intolerance.

With hurt often comes confusion for children. They wonder why they are being hurt or if they deserved it. In “The Sin Eaters,” however, we see an example of one who was hurt for the betterment of the world. In the short story a young Native American boy is sought out, along with hundreds of others, because his
skin, eyes, hair, and DNA are just right to save the world in some way unknown to the reader. Scared, empty, and constantly being stuck with needles, Jonah is given a message: “Dr. Clancy pushed another needle deep into my other hip. ‘You’re doing a brave thing. You’re saving the world’” (Alexie 115). “Dr. Clancy” is a white doctor who is inflicting pain upon Jonah’s body for some “greater good” of humanity. Unfortunately, being “brave” requires an element of choice that Jonah lacks as he is being held and restrained against his will and without knowledge of his choice. Jonah is excluded from the ‘greater’ purpose that the doctors and whites are privileged to experience. The idea of self-sacrifice for the betterment of humanity is a Christian ideology inspired by the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Because Jonah is not choosing to sacrifice himself, he is not self-sacrificing but rather being harvested for the salvation of others. Jonah, targeted because of his marginalized differences, illustrates how intolerance and trauma is inflicted under
the guise of sacrifice for the betterment of humanity. Since it is clear that one group is being harvested for the salvation of another group, inequality is present as well as intolerance. Intolerance is perpetuated when one group suffers at the hands of another and this suffering is carried on within individuals.

DNA is the genetic material that defines a life as far as what it looks like and how it functions. As the white doctors began pushing needles into him, Jonah thinks to himself, “the hypodermic syringe … sucked out pieces of my body … sucked out fluid ounces of my soul … sucked out pieces of all of my stories … sucked out pieces of my vocabulary” (Alexie 115). When the doctors where extracting what they believed to be nothing more than physical materials from Jonah they were actually taking his “body,” his “soul,” his “stories,” and his “vocabulary” which, for Jonah, was his true DNA. In other words, while the doctors were literally extracting materials from Jonah’s body, they
were crippling his spirit and identity. All of the things that Jonah saw the doctors taking from him were also the things the colonizers stole from and suppressed in Native American groups. This intentional mirroring represents the ongoing pain and loss of culture endured by Native Americans in the United States.

In “A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie,” Åse Nygren is interested in Alexie’s ideas on perpetuated suffering and how it is carried. Nygren claims that “The characters are muted by the traumas of hatred and chaos, loss and grief, danger and fear, and cannot—except in a few rare cases—articulate their suffering” (Nygren 151). This interview opens the door to taking a closer look at trauma within Alexie’s work. Nygren claims that characters are silenced, which leads to self-destructive behaviors. Alexie attempts to give language to suffering while also expressing that suffering cannot be shared; suffering is incomparable. Alexie’s responses in the
interview provide insight into why violence is so prevalent within his writing; Native Americans alive today are survivors of genocide. Trauma experienced by individual characters relates to the collective trauma of Native Americans. He once jokingly explained, “I think loss is in our DNA” (O’Connor). This is ironic considering that DNA seemed to be what was taken from Jonah. For Jonah, the DNA that doctors were extracting were his words and his history, and his history is pain. The doctors were not healing Jonah of the traumas carried deep within his bones, but rather using it for their gain. This exemplifies how privilege uses pain to perpetuate oppression.

For many, heritage is passed down and celebrated. Unfortunately for some it cannot be forgotten. Nancy Van Styvendale investigates the travel of trauma throughout Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and is intrigued by Alexie’s statement that “The United States is a colony and I’m always going to write like one who
is colonized, and that’s with a lot of anger” (212). In the dynamic of the “colony” and the “colonized,” the “colony” has a sense of righteousness and the “colonized” are robbed of space, resources, and freedom, and are often left with “anger.” The “United States” is not typically thought of as a colony, and it is especially does not think of itself that way. Outwardly stating that the US is a colony is a reminder of a history or heritage that most Americans have forgotten. The Native Americans cannot forget their role in colonialism because it coincided with the genocide of an entire group of people. Whites get to live freely in a land they claimed hundreds of years ago, only thinking about the white lives lost for this great land. Seeing this, knowing this, and living this is the seed of anger for the abused and of those less privileged than white Americans. The trauma of genocide grows in each following generation and lives in the skin, and has the ability to torture those marginalized in the white world.
Trauma is visible in the lives of a variety of characters but it is also traveling through generations. John Smith, the main character in the novel *Indian Killer*, is experiencing trauma despite his limited ties to his culture; he is aware and has even created his own traumatic creation narrative to fill the gap. As John describes it, “The doctor cuts the umbilical cord quickly … A nurse cleans John, washes away the blood, the remains of the placenta, the evidence. His mother is crying. ‘I want my baby. Give me my baby. I want to see my baby. Let me hold my baby’… The nurse swaddles John in blankets and takes him from the delivery room” (Alexie 5). John is then immediately transported to his adoptive white parents. This is the traumatic image that John created for himself that describes his birth. The cries from John’s mother demonstrate that she wanted to keep him, and never had the chance. This only adds to the pain in John’s life. He had no connections to his heritage and suffers for
it. The lack of connection to his real past, the forced generic connections, and his parents’ neglect of his mental problems resulted in a traumatic life for John. Despite being separated from a Native American heritage and delivered to a white family, John never assimilates into white culture, demonstrating that trauma experienced by Native Americans comes from white culture and perpetuates intolerance.

Before the novel begins, Alexie presents an epigraph from Alex Kuo: “We are what we have lost.” Through Kuo, Alexie implies that groups of people are literally defined by what they have lost along the way. John does not know what he has personally lost, but in his own mind, he feels as though he lost his mother, cousins and friends whom he never knew. He feels as though he has lost a tribe. The people that he imagines to have lost (because he was never connected to them) were people who were already carrying suffering from their heritage. John defines himself from what has
been taken away from him. What makes it worse is that John is not in a group of people that he can share this pain with; he is completely alone. The emptiness within John is a trauma that was given to him. He is a suffering Native American man in the white world and his suffering is perpetuated by the intolerance that he experiences through the neglect of his human needs.

Adoptions are often sensationalized; a person/couple gets a new baby, but what happens next? Margaret Homans, author of “Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins,” claims that John’s lack of authenticity of origin, combined with marginalization in the white home and neighborhood where he was raised, resulted in a lack of a sense of belonging in any realm. This ultimately dehumanized John and led to the deterioration of his character. A lack of connection to his true origin prevented John from developing properly. Because John was only subject to generic stereotypes with no ties to any family, he
created his own history. Adoption without a history or familial/cultural connections demonstrates that cultural displacement is traumatic and has life-long consequences. Furthermore, John’s internalized suffering and marginalization lead him into a life plagued by trauma perpetrated by the intolerance of his identity.

Christianity is a faith, but in the imperializing world it is also a tool for assimilation. Emily Metz-Cherné claims that “Alexie reveals the unchristian actions of the American nation” (178-179). Because the values of Christianity run so deeply in American culture, the idea that they could be accused of being unchristian would be a shock to early white culture in America. After all, these early settlers were ‘saving’ the savage Natives with the ‘gift’ of their faith. What seemed like good deeds and gifts were, in reality, incredibly destructive to Native Americans. John Smith’s life exemplifies this idea of a good deed gone
wrong. His white parents adopted him and loved him but when there were major warning signs that John was mentally slipping they wrote it off to his heritage. Encouragement without any cultural connections confused and alienated John, leaving him neglected. Marginalization created by the neglect of white parents and society traumatized John, perpetuating his pain and inequalities.

In *Flight* the main character who calls himself Zits experiences a journey through time and space and into other people’s perspectives. In his internal monologue Zits explains, “I’m fighting and kicking because that’s what I do. It’s how I’m wired. It’s my programming. I read once that if a kid has enough bad things happen to him before he turns five, he’s screwed for the rest of his life” (Flight 17). Just as a doorbell is wired to ring, Zits is wired for pain and violence; Zits explains that this has an impact on the rest of one’s life. These predetermined reactions are the result of the
suffering of Zits’ early youth and maybe even before he was born. This pain and rage from Zits is the result of the trauma that was passed to him through past generations and perpetuates suffering in his life.

Much of the trauma in Zits’ life that he was born with comes from his father. Later in the novel Zits realizes that “I am my father.” This is the realization for Zits that he is his father, physically at this stage in the book, but it also reveals something deeper. Zits sees that he and his father are the same. They have had similar youths and they were possibly headed on the same path. Zits’ father, Robert, was an abused child who suffered at the hands of his father. Zits was abused by a large number of people but was also hurt by the abandonment by his own father. Robert is currently an alcoholic on the streets who carried so much pain in his heart that the most he will ask from another person is their respect. Zits sees that the path of an abused child does not lead to a promising place; instead it results in
a circle. This is one of the most eye-opening scenes for Zits. The pain experienced by Robert lead him to being homeless and dysfunctional. Robert is a person who could not break the cycle. The suffering experienced by Robert as a child lead to his unraveling, which ultimately reveals to Zits the cyclical nature of suffering.

Suffering and its motivation moves in a cycle through generations. In the midst of war Zits wonders, “Is revenge a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle?” (Flight 77). Here the “circles” that Zits considers are cycles of pain and suffering. One group attacks another; that group feels pain and loss and then retaliates. Upon retaliation, the first group feels pain and loss and retaliates. And so on. Pain begets more pain. Just as revenge is a driving force behind the cycle, intolerance also drives the same cycle of suffering. One group is marginalized and disrespected so that the majority group can grow in power. This allows the marginalized to develop more internalized pain and suffering while
the majority group develops a deeper internalized intolerance for other groups. Cycles of suffering allow cycles of intolerance to grow until the intolerance and the suffering deplete together.

Judith Shulevitz, author of “The Science of Suffering” explores the ways in which trauma travels through generations, ultimately claiming,

There is biological PTSD, and familial PTSD, and cultural PTSD. Each wreaks damage in its own way. There are medicines and psychotherapies and the consolations of religion and literature, but the traumatized will never stop bequeathing anguish until groups stop waging war on other groups and leaving members of their own to rot in the kind of poverty and absence of care that fosters savagery. (18)

By drawing connections between intergenerational
suffering and post-traumatic stress disorder Shulevitz highlights the severity of the struggle with trauma. A major catastrophic event like genocide cannot pass in a day, a decade, or several generations; instead it is carried and preserved in the lives of children who will pass it on to their children and so on. Pain will live and grow until resolution is met. As long as groups are growing in pain from intolerance, intolerance will grow in turn. For Zits, however, a growth in awareness and a giving person can be a step in breaking the cycle of suffering.

*Flight* comes to an end with a message of hope. Zits, who feels as though he has been given a new home, thinks

I haven’t been hugged like that since my mother died.

I’m happy.

I’m scared, too. I mean, I know the world is still a cold and cruel place.

I know that people will always go to war
against each other.

I know that people will always be targets.

I know people will always betray each other.

I know that I am a betrayer.

But I’m beginning to think I’ve been given a chance. (180)

This end-thought from Zits is a message of hope. He can see that the world is not a perfect place. Suffering and trauma still exist and have power. The remarkable and touching fact is that Zits has the sight and opportunity to change. This change occurs through the acknowledgement of his faults. After the first-hand experience of the faults of others, others who were in different positions than him, Zits can understand that everyone has faults and pain but it does not have to be the defining characteristic of an individual. Pain is this deep and strong cycle, but it is not so predetermined
that it cannot be changed, and Zits experiences this opportunity and creates the message that suffering is deep in the bones and skin of certain groups of people, but with hope and persistence, greater outcomes beyond the transferring of trauma can be achieved.
Works Cited


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