



The search for identity between Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* & Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*: A comparative study

Jinan Abdulla Shafiq^a, ^aCollege of Arts Department of English, Emam Jaffar
Al – Sadiq University, Iraq, Email: alazzawiji@gmail.com

Self-identity is affected by a multitude of cultural elements, including race, class, cuisine, language, gender, religion, geography, national heritage and personal beliefs. The question of identity has dominated postcolonial studies and has subsequently appeared increasingly in postmodern literature. This issue of identity focuses on how colonisers undermined the cultural aspects of colonised communities, which holds prevalence in current literature as many postmodern writers have experienced cultural exile and alienation themselves. This paper investigates identity in relation to colonisation through the comparison of two novels by outstanding American authors who endured their own respective searches for identity. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* tells the story of a Bengali family who migrates to America. While the mother feels detached from her home culture, her children initially prefer assimilation until they realise the true nature of certain behaviours towards them. This realisation of the outsiders' attitudes leads the children to return to their roots for peace and identity. Sherman Alexi's novel *Reservation Blues* tells of Native Americans who search for identity in the American society beyond the borders of their reservation. Despite their efforts to fit in, the Native Americans are labelled as 'the other'. In surviving this suffering at the hands of their colonisers, however, they succeed in keeping their culture alive.

Key words: *Assimilation, Coloniser, Identity, Multicultural, Postcolonial theory, The other.*



Introduction

In a society of cultural diversification and increasing interest in the human condition, any individual identity can face some degree of confusion. This quest for identity is a chief element in postcolonial writing (Lazarus 2000, p. 66). The theoretical quarrel about identity usually concerns its nature, development, and the reason for its existence. Identity construction has been linked to an individual's social position, with elements like race, class and gender directly influencing one's sense of self. Identity as a term has received much attention within the field of postcolonial theories; it has been at the centre of much sociological research and is an important aspect of social anthropology. The search for identity is an idea frequently expressed in literature and is considered one of the most important issues of the modern world (Lazurua 2004, p. 2).

Postcolonial societies comprise of mixed, or diluted, cultures, which can give rise to a sense of loss among its communities. In their missions of infiltration and civilisation, colonisers often neglected the native culture and languages of colonised countries in favour of their own peoples (Marker, 2003). Though direct colonialism no longer exists, its ideologies still affect many cultures' social, political, economic and religious practices (McEwan 2009, p. 21). Throughout the course of literary history, these ideologies and negative impacts they produce have been represented time and again. Concepts of exile and the search for identity preoccupy the imaginations of many authors who have experienced firsthand such alienation, whether from political, social, economic or other reasons related to colonisation.

Methods

This study analyses two novels by renowned Asian-American authors to explore the idea of postcolonial identity. An initial investigation into the authors' personal histories and experiences will provide insight into their own cultural perceptions and self-identities. A detailed exposition of each novel will follow to highlight the authors' experiences of identity issues. The Indian American identity featuring in *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri, describes a major true event in the author's life. Lahiri's story centres on her family's struggle to maintain their native Indian culture in America, and how their identities are affected by cultural assimilation from generation to generation. The Native American identity in Sherman Alexi's novel *Reservation Blues* depicts Native Americans' struggles to find their identities and their dealings with discrimination from a mixed-culture society.

Discussion

Issues surrounding the search for identity pertain to an individual who has lost his or her place in society, or who is forced to migrate between communities due to political, cultural,



economic or other societal reasons. These issues can negatively impact one's sense of belonging and societal value, tropes which are particularly evident in modern literature. This study focuses on such literary representations of lost identity, specifically the Indian American identity and the Native American identity.

Indian American Identity

American literature written by authors of culturally diverse backgrounds often revolves around the difficult struggle to define and solidify self-identities. Indian American novelist Jhumpa Lahiri is one such writer who focuses on the struggles of Indian identity with an emphasis on the Indian landscape and Indian characters. Lahiri lives with her husband and children in the United States and belongs to the second generation of Indian American migrants (Chetty 2006, p. 41).

Lahiri studied English at Barnard College and graduated in 1989, after which she completed her Master's degree in English and Comparative Literature, finishing with a PhD in Renaissance Studies in 1997. One of Lahiri's most notable works, *The Namesake* (2006), deals with the complex search for identity. The novel tells the story of a young couple, Ashima and Ashok Ganguli, who after meeting through arranged marriage in Calcutta, India, leave their country in search for better opportunities and livelihoods. The couple soon settle in America where they start a family, but like so many immigrants, they begin suffering from issues of double identity; their desire to assimilate into society is mixed with anxiety and confusion towards its strange new culture.

Lahiri's biography is another important work in her repertoire with the original manuscript written in Italian, a language that Lahiri studied since childhood. Later translated into English, the biography provides deep insight into Lahiri's own struggles with identity and the powerful effects of cultural alienation (Roy 2016, p. 11). Through utilising the third-party language of Italian, neither her native nor her migrant dialect, Lahiri claimed to feel a sense of freedom from the pressures of identity rivalries which she includes in her biography: "today I no longer feel bound to restore a lost country to my parents" (Roy 2016, p. 3). Lahiri's experiences of assimilating two blended cultures and her subsequent battles with a dual identity have framed her acclaimed work as a writer in English and as a descendent of Bengali immigrants.

The Namesake opens with an emotional scene as the protagonist, Ashima Ganguli, delivers her first child in an American hospital. Still adapting to life in America, Ashmia reflects that childbirth in her home of Calcutta traditionally gave rise to family celebrations in which her mother, mother-in-law, sisters and friends would have supported and comforted her. The process of new life should, she thinks, be in the company of loved ones rather than strangers.



With her husband Ashoke Ganguli away studying at university and the aid of unknown doctors surrounding her, Ashima admits that "...for as grateful as she feels for the company...these acquaintances are only substituting them. Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true" (*Namesake*, ch. 2). Ashima much prefers the Indian traditions of childbirth over the stressful, sterilised protocols involved in America and wishes for her old cultural norms for this pivotal moment in her life.

Regarding her newborn baby, Ashima reflects that "...it is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die.... In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands ... and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives" (*Namesake*, 1-4). In line with these traditions, Ashima and Ashoke had planned to leave the naming of their newborn baby to its grandmother in India. This customary naming practice would bless their child and bring the couple a vestige of the native culture they are now so far away from. Hospital authorities pressure the new parents to name their baby quickly, however, leaving his father to nickname him 'Gogol' after his favourite Russian author, Nikoloi Gogoli. Ashok later gives him the traditional Bengali name Nikhil, though somehow his initial nickname pervades. This name is neither English nor Bengali and instils a sense of relief due to its separation from the rivalling cultures. The name Gogol exists without prejudice or pressure to align with either of the Ganguli's dual identities.

Gogol becomes the centre of his mother's life and senses the awful loneliness she suffers from. He becomes aware of the differences between his native Indian culture and the American community in which he grows up, quickly realising this disparity which so affects his mother. Gogol detests his name as it reminds him of this disparity and of his Indian heritage: "He is afraid to be Nikhil...it is part of growing up, they tell him, of being Bengali" (*Namesake*, 3. 19). He becomes confused and upset, "for by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain." (*Namesake*, 4. 9). When Gogol's sister, Sonia, is born, Ashima feels that although her children are lucky to grow up with the opportunities of this new land, she resents that their childhood will lack the family relationships, traditions and cultures of her home in Calcutta. By the time Nikhil (Gogol) reaches his teenage years, he is fully fledged within his American society. Nikhil criticises his parents' way of life and their continuance of homeland traditions which further affects their relationship, causing a disparity between parents and son. Despite Ashima and Ashoke's best efforts to instil Bengali traditions in their children, including trips to Bengali and Calcutta and even family gatherings at their home in America, the children resent all elements of their native country. Seeing themselves as outsiders, both Nikhil and Sonia believe that they do not belong to the Indian community their parents cling to: "...he will go downstairs, join the



party, his family. But for now, his mother...[is] unaware of her son's absence" (*Namesake*, 12. 25).

The novel progresses into Nikhil and Sonia's adult years, detailing Nikhil's independent career in architecture and his engagement to an American woman, Maxine. When Ashoke passes away from a heart attack, however, Nikhil is deeply affected and quickly returns home to support his mother and sister. Gogol eventually grows fond of the nickname he once hated and begins to find comfort in the Bengali traditions that he once rebelled against. *The Namesake* therefore explores the power and importance that a name can carry and its crucial role in forming identity through representing familial and cultural roots. This is evidenced in Gogol's decision to shape his own identity by changing his name to Nikhil before leaving for College. The confusion surrounding Gogol/Nikhil's identity as represented in the ambiguity of his name places pressure on him, acting as a constant reminder of the gap between his family's Indian heritage and his own desire for a modern, liberated American lifestyle. Gogol's decision to return to his family after his father's death signifies his acceptance of the Bengali culture and his willingness to finally identify with it.

The story continues and Nikhil meets and marries Moushumi, Bengali girl with a similar background to Nikhil. Upon their marriage, Moushumi prefers to keep her family name: "Moushumi has kept her last name, she doesn't adopt Ganguli, not even with a hyphen. Her last name, Mazoomdar, is already a mouthful. With a hyphenated surname, she would no longer fit into a window of a business envelope. Besides, by now she has begun to publish under Moushumi Mazoomdar, the name printed at the top of footnoted articles on French feminist theory in a number of prestigious academic journals..." (*Namesake*, 8. 21). As a Bengal-American woman and feminist, Moushumi encounters her own issues of identity which are arguably more complicated than Nikhil's experiences due to her decision to keep her own name. Nikhil and his wife now have ties to two cultures while simultaneously feeling that they do not properly belong to either of them. This disparity causes tensions in their relationships and ultimately leads to divorce.

The novel concludes with the Ganguli family coming together again in support and solidarity: Sonia is now engaged, Ashima travels to Calcutta for six months each year to visit relatives, and Nikhil finds a book in his old bedroom that his father once gave him as a birthday present. After years of ignoring this book, on which is printed the name he once hated, Nikhil finally reads the book and comes to accept his name and cultural identity. Nikhil's attitude towards his family changes drastically by the end of the story, and he wishes his relationship with his father could have been stronger before his death.

The story of *The Namesake* is a detailed exploration of the second-generation immigrant's quest for identity. Many of these individuals find difficulty in identifying with their heritage

due to the physical and psychological disparities between two contrasting cultures, which can have far-reaching effects on all aspects of life. This is evident in *The Namesake*, in which Indian American characters are trapped between two worlds. The parents struggle to adapt to their new environment and cling to the familiarity of their home culture, while their second-generation children initially reject these traditional ideals in favour of their migrant country. In understanding both of their cultures and learning how to assimilate themselves within each world, however, the children come to terms with their backgrounds and achieve a sense of peace, clarity and identity.

Many of Lahiri's writings illustrate these multi-cultural ideas and emphasise the often-troublesome experiences of second-generation immigrants. Accordingly, most of her writings contain themes of hybridity, affection, custom, alienation, nostalgia, and crisis of identity due to such multi-cultural lifestyles (Stoneham, 2000, p. 81-92). Lahiri's work also highlights the importance of family, a construct which is vital in dealing with cultural assimilation and issues of identity. Her written language is clear, easily read and quickly understood, which assists in getting her stories across to readers effectively and efficiently. Her stories, like *The Namesake*, are usually set in Indian and America and establish the Indian American condition that she identifies with:

Indian – American has been a constant way to describe me, less constant is my leadership to the term. When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally, the case. (Soelistyarini 2011, p. 91).

As represented in her work, Lahiri expresses that India has no single culture; rather, it is a unique mixture of different cultures and customs. Culture and tradition are passed down by generation, and when second-generation immigrants are partly attached to their homeland, these traditions see cultural shifts that introduce new ideas belonging to the host country. In the case of *The Namesake*, Nikhil and Sonia are born in the United States and thus integrate aspects of American culture into their lives. Their search for identity is a natural result of the confusion surrounding these cultural assimilations, and the displacement and disparity that surround them.

Contrastingly, Ashima and Ashoke successfully continue their Indian traditions within their new American environment: they regularly see close Bengali friends, and Ashima wears saris while resisting Western holidays like Christmas. Nikhil and Sonia resist these customs, and



their parents realise know that despite the many wonderful opportunities presented by this new country, their children will not grow up in the same way they were raised in Calcutta.

Native American Identity

Though not immigrants of their country, Native Americans also struggle with this sense of otherness which stems from the historic colonisation of their land. Native America peoples hold strong and age-old customs, beliefs and values, many of which were cast out with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the infiltration of European settlements. Native Americans believe that life emerges from the inner earth, seeing this earth as a mother's womb that cultivates life. This idea is a common faith that shapes their relationship with their land (Martin 2001, p. 111). Such a strong spiritual attachment to the Motherland and the Father sky is core to Native American custom and informs their identity, which was threatened and ultimately uprooted by colonisation (Hightower - Langston 2003, p. 125). The historical suffering and cultural alienation due European settlement in America has pervaded Native American culture ever since and increases the difficulty in re-constructing and subsequently maintaining their culture and identity (DM & GF 2009, p. 569).

Sherman Alexie is a Native American author who has dealt with such issues and believes in the importance of being attached to one's own roots to keep native culture, traditions and identity alive. Born in 1966 in Wellpinit on the Spokane Indian Reservation, Sherman Alexie was one of six children growing up in the poverty of their reservation. After attending a Westernised school in Reardon for some time, Alexie joined a Roman Catholic high school in Spokane and won a scholarship to Gonzage University. After two years of tertiary study, he transferred to Washington State University in Pullman and graduated in 1991 (Connette 2010, p. 45).

Initially aiming to be doctor or lawyer, Alexie only found peace and fulfilment in his literature classes. Native American poetry inspired him to produce his own writings, which are largely influenced by his difficult childhood on the reservation. In 1992, Alexie published his anthology *The Business of Fancy Dancing: Stories and Poems*. (Allam 2009, pp. 157-168). Alexie regularly uses Indian reservations as backgrounds for his novels. Indian reservations are regions within the United States; they have their own federal government on lands dwelt by American Indians. Those native dwellers represent tribes that have the choice to uphold and preserve the heritage of their culture. One of the problems with understanding of Native American tribes and their rights is the public misunderstanding of their unique and complex history (Wilinson 2006, p. 266). Living within a larger and more mainstream community of Anglo-Americans can thus provide the opportunity to overcome such social boundaries and instigate cross-cultural exchange. Consequently, Sherman Alexie represents the distinctive role of the Native American within the now conventional American society.



Rather than arousing the need for blending or assimilation, Alexie's narratives signify the Indian identity as unique and distinctive from other cultures. Alexie's novels also focus largely on the human condition (Warrior 1995, p. 31).

Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995), tells the story of a Rock and Blues band made up of [Spokane](#) Indians from the [Spokane Reservation](#). Alexie utilised his own experiences as a child growing up in the Spokane Reservation to write the setting and plot. The reservation is depicted in *Reservation Blues* as:

...gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too. (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 3).

In the novel, Junior Polatkin and Victor Joseph meet Robert Johnson, a mysterious American Blues musician. Johnson's appearance on the reservation shocks the tribe; Wellpinit is a town that does not exist on a map, and outsiders had never set foot in the Spokane Indian Reservation until now (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 1). Johnson's motives for entering the land are soon revealed: he seeks a mystic woman who regularly appears to him in his dreams, telling him that "she can get rid of the 'Gentleman'". Johnson learns that this woman may be the Big Mom, a woman who lives on the reservation mountaintop. Other characters describe her presence and role in the tribe, detailing how she "...play[s] a new flute song every morning to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily." (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 1). Robert Johnson therefore seeks power and knowledge from Big Mom, the immortal spirit, who taught such musical geniuses as Elvis, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Johnson's musical journey progresses with the company of three Spokane musicians, and together they form a band. Thomas as the lead vocalist, Junior Polatkin on drums, and both Victor and Johnson as guitarists. Johnson's guitar proves to be an incredibly significant element of the band's journey, though not necessarily in a positive sense. The group soon drive outside the reservation with goals of fame and self-discovery. They create a new name for themselves, Coyote Springs, and implements Native American elements into their music:

Coyote Springs created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience. That music might have chased away the pilgrims five hundred years ago...The audience reached for Coyote Springs with brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope,



and joy. Coyote Springs felt powerful, fell in love with the power, and courted it. (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 3).

The band quickly grows in popularity and introduces two more white followers beside the Indian imitators, Veronica and Betty. As Coyote Spring's reputation expands, the group is invited to play in Montana at the Flathead Indian Reservation. Here they meet the Warm Water sisters, Chess and Checkers, who are musicians themselves and agree to join the band. Coyote Springs continues to grow in fame and fortune and soon captures capitalist attentions, becoming integrated into the 'American dream'. The real power of the band lies with Johnson's guitar, which is revealed to hold powers that produce unbelievable and addictive music, but which also comes at an awful cost to its player. The reader discovers that Johnson has been controlled by this guitar for years and has sold his soul to the devil in return for its otherworldly music and the fame that accompanies it.

Meanwhile, the band is invited to New York to audition for Cavalry Records, a prestigious American record company. Using Johnson's guitar, Victor is suddenly betrayed by the instrument which causes the group to fail their audition: "Victor's guitar kept withering in his hands until it broke the straps and fell to the floor in a flurry of feedback" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 4). This pivotal moment is foreshadowed by Lakota's cautions at the very beginning that "music is dangerous thing" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 1), marking the guitar as a capitalist symbol of greed, fame and power that ultimately destroys the band. Ashamed, the band returns to the reservation, where Junior tragically commits suicide. The story ends with a song by Thomas, Chess and Checkers, previously taught to them by the Big Mom and representative of their distinct Native American roots.

Through this exciting and captivating story, *Reservation Blues* presents ideas of cultural appropriation and exchange as experienced by the central characters. Cultural appropriation occurs when a dominant group steals from a troubled culture and use those stolen elements for its own advantage while dehumanising the people who created them (Fitz & Gross 2007, p. 52). Cultural exchange, on the other hand, refers to the use of other cultural elements without dehumanisation. Alexie presents Coyote Springs as an example of this latter idea of cultural exchange. The Native American Blues group represent two traditionally burdened cultures of Native and Black Americans who both share suffering and draw strength from one another. The Cavalry Records oppose this ideal, pushing for cultural appropriation and representing the power of white majority. This institution employs two white women, Veronica and Betty, to sell music to Native American peoples. At the same time, they underestimate the Native American identity by mocking the Spokane group and their culture, rather than celebrating a common history.



Alexie's novel explores the Native American peoples as a minority and how they mix and cooperate with white American majorities. When Chess sees Victor and Junior having physical relations with white women, for instance, she accuses them of betraying their heritage: "Junior and Victor get to have beautiful white women on their arms, and Betty and Veronica get to have Indian men..." (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 5). Chess wants traditional Indian ideals to be kept alive and rejects this kind of assimilation, stating "I think Indian men need Indian women, I think only Indian women can take care of Indian men...we give birth to Indian men. We feed them. We hold them when they cry. Then, they run off with white women" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 5). She is the only Indian woman in the story who maintains these traditional beliefs and values. Further, Chess realises the weakening of the Indian blood within her mixed-blood son. She tells Veronica that her son will be "beaten because he's half-bread ...no matter what he does..." (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 4). Chess seeks to safeguard her child and her tribe from the growth of mixed-blood Indians who "... get all the Indian jobs, all the Indian chances, because they look white" (*Reservation Blues*, ch.4). These cross-cultural people are seen both as victims and villains, unwelcome on the reservation and considered damaging to the tribe. On the other hand, male characters believe that white women are "trophies for Indian boys" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 5). Junior states that "getting a white woman was...the best kind of revenge against white men" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 5).

The reservation in Alexie's novel is presented as a space of nurturing and healing, serving as a personification for the Indian historical perspective. Living in isolation and in ignorance of the traditional world, secular rituals are key to the Indians' survival. Much like Lahiri's characters engaged in traditional Bengali practices in their new American home, so too the Native Indians cling to their customs while surrounded by colonised white American society. They possess a sense of disillusionment, of nostalgia for the past, and they continue to search for their identity because of these difficulties. Adoption of American ways is not regarded as a disloyalty of Indian culture, but rather is simply considered an inevitable part of modern life. This leads many natives to feel unhappy and lost as it takes them closer to American ideals and farther away from their roots.

Johnson's guitar functions as a symbol of these American ways of life. It represents capitalist greed, fear and persecution, negative connotations that are clearly seen when Thomas picks the guitar up, sensing "...a small pain in the palms of his hands" after which he "heard the first sad note of the reservation blues" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 1). Alexie cleverly uses the guitar dualistically as it both brings the group together with its wonderful musical powers, and also forces them apart with its ultimate betrayal. Further, the guitar is not a traditional Indian instrument, but is rather associated with Western cultures. Unlike the flutes, rattles and whistles of Indian American heritage, instruments which produce spiritual and healing sounds that echo nature, stringed instruments are considered secular with no connection to Native American history. No matter how hard the Native Americans in *Reservation Blues* try to



assimilate and accept the guitar as part of their band, it ultimately rejects them and causes their downfall (Belcher 2007, p. 29).

As evidenced in this analysis, at the crux of Alexie's novel is the dilemma faced by Native American people living within a colonised white society. Much as Lahiri's story is based on struggles from her own life, Alexie also represents his personal experiences with poverty, alcoholism and despair in his novel. The Indian characters that have required assimilation sooner or later reject American prejudices, choosing instead to hold onto their traditional morals and beliefs. Victor has an especially strong desire to rebel against his roots of Native American tradition, which soon turns against him in a whirlwind of cross-cultural confusion. Victor's anger, violence and alcoholism manifest because of these internal struggles and are used as defence mechanisms against them:

...against his whole life. ...He had enough anger inside to guide every salmon over Grand Coulee Dam. He wanted to steal a New York cop's horse and go on the warpath. He wanted to scalp stockbrokers and kidnap supermodels. He wants to shoot flaming arrows into museum of Modern Art. He wanted to lay siege to Radio City Music Hall. Victor wanted to win. Victor wanted to get drunk (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 8).

Alcoholism is a common problem among the reservation; it is a way to forget the suffering of poverty and the sense of loss that cultivates Native American life after years of subjugation by the American government.

Alexie's novel also incorporates many popular culture references that cleverly emphasise the hardships that Native Americans face in modern colonised society. Betty and Veronica, for instance, are characters from the comic magazine *Archie's Gang* and Robert Johnson is an old Blues legend. Other pop-culture names appear as Big Mom's previous students, all of whom are arguably the most distinguishable Rock and Roll musicians of the modern world: Presley, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Chuck Berry, Diana Ross and Paul McCartney all feature in *Reservation Blues*, instilling a strong sense of infiltrated Western culture even within the confines of the reservation.

Alexie's characters are stuck firstly on the reservation, and rather than looking toward to a better future, they look back to their history of oppression and abuse, an image the author uses and repeats; "...the Indian horses screamed" (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 7) represents the Indians who fall victims at the hand of white Americans. Ironically, Alexie regards the splendid Indian past as a fake image of Hollywood. Those Indians were unable to recombine with the past, nor are able to achieve a confident future. Left with only the present, the



reservation Indians, focus merely on survival. It is significant that the past here is portrayed as a skeleton. Clearly, Alexie is not; looking to the past is not the solution. As Jennifer L. Gillan (1996) puts it, “Alexie struggles against the tendency to romanticise the past that he sees in much Native American writing” (p. 96).

The Indian character is the centre of any Indian identity, and the reservation is an important part of any Indian experience. As Alexie’s work exposes, that the reservation is not an experience all Indians can go through but it has for sure a great effect on the Indian Culture and identity. Since the reservation is centred between Western influence and Indian culture, the roughness tension between those cultures is supposed to be lessened. The Indian who leaves the reservation for an opportunity is sometimes accused of being a traitor according to their tribe’s law. Chess once says to Thomas “I’ve always had a theory that you ain’t really Indian unless, at some point in your life, you didn’t want to be Indian” (*Reservation Blues*, ch. 5). In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie faces the notion of a centre, considering it as simply part of Indian identity rather than a position of culture.

Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*’ is considered a masterpiece for its contributions to the rich and ancient Native Indian American literature. N. Scott Momaday sums its major characteristics up comprehensively in his declaration:

Native American Literature...is distinguished from other literatures...it has its own experience and its own language, its own rhythms...It represents a particular kind of experience, and a particular viewpoint, a particular world view...Native Americans... see the world as possessed of spirit, for one thing. They have a great respect for the earth and for the physical world...[Furthermore] Native Americans have a very highly developed sense of language and a very rich oral tradition, and I think they tend to take language more seriously than most other people. They have a very highly developed sense of humour, which is not easily accessible to other people... (T)he artistic expression of the Native American worlds is very special. (Isernhagen 1999, pp. 30-31).

Alexie does not use the native character to preach a universal agenda; he just presents individual Indians in a multicultural society. The reservation centre is not a place, but it is a character within a person. This is seen clearly in *Reservation Blues*, in which the characters are shown able to face and alter the mixed culture experience. And the “Blues Music” is the most important element that different beliefs meet with one another. The blues music is

originally created by Black Americans, who like the Native Americans share the sense of oppression on the hands of White American people (Pasquaretta 2003, p. 278-291).

Many Native American writers aim to reveal the harsh and far-reaching effects of the colonialist mentality, and how America infiltrated native lands and cultures with materialism, racism and spiritual degradation. Alexie makes no attempt to link characters to universal themes or to emotional experiences that go beyond race, but rather highlights Native American peoples' survival through suffering. The message behind Alexie's writings is that although some degree of assimilation may indeed be necessary to survive in this colonised world, Native Americans should not let this assimilation overpower their traditional culture. Alexie encourages a new idea of what it is to be Indian. He states that although this idea is disturbing to many Native Indians, it is the truth that one should accept. Whether to resist or to assimilate, it is vital to maintain one's traditional cultural roots, as these roots are the essence of one's true identity.

Conclusion

This analysis of two renowned cross-cultural novels and the exploration of their respective authors' struggles with identity show the far-reaching effects of colonisation and forced culture assimilation. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri depicts the increasingly complex crisis of one family's Bengali-American identity as it gets passed from one generation to another. While immigrants Ashima and Ashoke cling to their native heritage, their second-generate children Nikhil (Gogol) and Sonia rebel against these family traditions and instead choose to assimilate into American society. As evidenced in this study's analysis, these efforts only add to the familial pressures and sense of otherness; it is not until both children understand and accept their native culture that they find peace and a sense of belonging to both their Indian and American communities.

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* presents Native Americans in a similarly multicultural scenario. Unlike Lahiri, however, Alexie limits the scope of his world to the reservation, which is a mini native community. The band Coyote Springs, comprising both white American members of Native American musicians, is an illustration of cultural assimilation attempts which ultimately prove to be impossible. The Native culture, as represented by band and its music, and the American culture as represented by the guitar, struggle to get along due to deep misunderstandings and an overall disparity in practices, beliefs and ideals. Alexie and Lahiri therefore approach the crisis of identity from different perspectives; Lahiri focuses on social relationships and familial ties to bring cultural identities together, while Alexie maintains that two such contrasting cultures (especially those with roots in colonisation) should understand one another but remain distinct. Both novels and authors present highly insightful and relevant perspectives on the issue of identity among multicultural and



colonised communities and have thus contributed significantly to this important discussion in modern literature.

Acknowledgment

The Author would like to thank Professor. Dr. Saad Najim for his support and advice on this work.



REFERENCES

- Aleiss, A. (2005). *Making and White man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood movies*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Alexie, S. (1995). *Reservation Blues*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Allam, L. (2009). *Reservation to Riches: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie*. Jackson: University of Mississippi.
- Allen, P. G. (1986). *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*: Boston: Beacon Press.
- Armstrong, J. (1999). Interview. Momaday, Vizenor, Armstrong: Conversations on American Indian Writing. In: Ed. Hartwig Isernhagen. Norman: U of Okla-homa P.
- Belcher, W. (2007). Conjuring the Colonizer: Alternative Readings of Magic Realism in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*. *American Indian culture and research journal*, 31(2), 87-101.
- Buell, L. (2001). *Writing for an Endangered World, Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S and Beyond*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.
- Chetty, Raj G. (2006). *Versions of America: Reading American Literature for Identity Difference*. Provo: Brigham Young University. Retrieved from <http://scolarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/765> on 6th December 2018
- Connette, Tracey L. (2010) Sherman Alexie's *Reservation*: Relocating the Center of Indian Identity.
- Fitz, K., & Gross, K. D. (2007). Native American Literature as a Transcultural and Multimedia Experience: Sherman Alexie's "Reservation Blues". *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 417-443.
- Gillan, J. (1996). Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry. *American Literature*, 68(1), 91-110.
- Grandbois, D. M., & Sanders, G. F. (2009). The resilience of Native American elders. *Issues in mental health nursing*, 30(9), 569-580.
- Hightower-Langston, D.. (2003). *The Native American World*: J. Wiley.



http://thescholarship.ecu.edu/bitstream/handle/10342/3160/Connette_ecu_0600M_10313.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Lahiri, J. (2004). *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins India.

Lazarus, N. (2000). "Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism", in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, (2000: 66).

Lazarus, N. (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University College.

Marker, S. (2003). "Effects of Colonization." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Retrieved from <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/post-colonial> on 10th December 2018

Martin, J. W. (2001). *The land looks after us: A history of Native American religion*. USA: Oxford University Press.

McEwan, C. (2009). *Postcolonial and Development*. Oxon: Routledge.

Pasquaretta, P. (2003). African-Native American Subjectivity and the Blues Voice in the Writings of Toni Morrison and Sherman Alexie. *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature*, 278-291. Champaign: University of Illinois Press

Roy, P. (2016). *Toronto Star newspaper*, "Jhumpa Lahiri's memoir an illuminating look at identity and creativity". (Feb. 28, 2016). Retrieved from. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2016/02/28/jhumpa-lahiris-memoir-an-illuminating-look-at-identity-and-creativity.html>.

Soelistyarini, Titien Diah. (2011). Caught between Two Worlds: The Search for Cultural Identity in Lahiri's *The Namesake* . <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Caught-Between-Two-Worlds-the-Search-for-PKDWRJJ4K6ZYS>

Stoneham, G. (2000). 'It's a Free Country': Visions of Hybridity in the Metropolis. In *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures* (pp. 81-92): Springer.

Warrior, R. A. (1995). *Tribal secrets: recovering American Indian intellectual traditions*: Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press.

Wilkinson, Charles F. (2005). *Blood struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations*. New York: WW Norton & Company.