



QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN 'THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO SAY PHOENIX, ARIZONA'

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In all the great works of literature search of self has been an eternal theme. Man's existence from the very beginning has been remained an endless quest for success and fulfillment. Literature being a mirror to life reflects this persistent quest of man. All the great literature has been searching for the significance and meaning of life in meaningless and futile conditions. To understand or to know the universe completely is too ambiguous. Since the time immemorial heroes and heroines of literature have been facing this dilemma. The incessant quest for understanding the world and its inhabitants goes on.

Quest for identity is a state of psychological distress, occurring especially in adolescence, when adolescence seeks a clearer sense of self and an acceptable role in the society. It is a period of uncertainty about 'who' or 'what' he or she is and a phase of confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or roles in the society. In this state there is confusion in the mind of a person, regarding the goals or priorities.

Questions such as Who am I? Who am I becoming? Where do I come from? Who am I in relationship to other people in my life? etc., are at the core of identity formation. Such questions changing over time make commitments and explore choices are based on the cultural and historical contexts of the self. In this phase human beings ask some existential questions, such as who am I and what can I be? what is my sexual identity?, what role am I supposed to play etc.

In an evolving, complex and lifelong process of identity formation an individual develops a sense of self. Freundlich cites from Alex Haley,

In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness. (3)

According to *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, identity as a concept can be defined as "...the search for self and its relationship to social contexts and realities." (Gates, 270)

This identity quest or consciousness is clarified by Buddha,

...the coexistence or aggregation of the physical elements produces consciousness wherever there was *Rupa* or *Kaya* there was consciousness accompanying it. (Ambedkar, 263)

In *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology* Loke, a modern psychologist in connection with personal identity says:

...personal identity consists not in the identity of any substance (whether material or immaterial) but in sameness of consciousness. (458)

In Freudian philosophy, identity is a manifestation of the ego, super ego and consciousness or identity. In Kantian phraseology 'self' is empirical. Hindu philosophy has kept 'soul' at the centre and considers it as,

... the gross assortment of *mana* (mind), *chitta*, (intelligence) and *ahankara* (egotism) surrounding the soul. (Ambhore, 15)

In Thorbole it is cited from *Encyclopaedia of Applied Developmental Science* that

...identity, has Latin origins and is derived from the word identities; the word is formed from idem, meaning "same". (63)

Further Thorbole quotes from M. Blumer that identity is, "...a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance." (66)

In literature characters who quest for identity are unable to extricate themselves from the conflict between 'who' they are and 'what' they are supposed to be. There is a conflict between person and a group or with another person or a group. This conflict leads to self awareness, self actualization and eventual achievement of a character. They face the dichotomy between sense of alienation and solitariness. In literature there is longing for home. Sometimes dual or hybrid identities are formed. Characters face the problem of ethnic identity. In literature themes related to identity crisis are between person and society, person and culture and person in tragic situation.

In literature concepts of identity and identity formation are often linked to the Eric Erikson's significant writing on the "eight stages of man", which occur across the lifespan of an individual, contribute to the development of man's self-esteem. Every human being has to cross through the each phase of psychosocial development. These eight stages are crisis in the psyche of human being between basic trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame or doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego versus despair.

Eric Erikson is credited for the term Identity Crisis. When adolescence fails to achieve ego identity it is resulted into Identity Crisis. In this phase one forms self image with physical growth, sexual maturity, and integrating of ideas etc. Transitioning from one stage to another such as infancy, childhood, adulthood etc. each stage has its crisis. This passage of time aids in the formation of many identities in the adolescence.

While defining the term identity in exact Erickson says:

A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being with its future as well as its history or mythology. (1950, 27-28)

According to Erikson Identity is "... the accrued (human) confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the

sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others, as evidenced in the tangible promise of a career." (1950, p.261)

According to Erikson an optimal "sense of identity" as a sense of psychosocial well-being, is "...a feeling of being at home in one's body, a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness or anticipated recognition from those who count." (1959, p. 165)

James Marcia, a Canadian Developmental Psychologist has refined and extended Erikson's model of Identity Crisis. His Identity Status Theory focuses on the development of adolescent. There are various statuses of identity. In Identity Diffusion status there is no choice and no commitment to anything. Identity Foreclosure status has willingness to commit. Identity Moratorium is a current crisis, exploring and ready to make choices. Last status, an Identity Achievement gets passing through different stages of identity crisis.

Identity belongs to any given individual, is shared by all the members of a particular group. It is interpreted in both, in relation and in context. One's identity is formed through one's identifications with others. If values, beliefs and characteristics of others are harmless one aspires it. Otherwise one wishes to dissociate from these characteristics.

An individual playing different roles throughout his life develops different interdependent identities, are relational identity, sexual identity, academic identity, occupational identity, cultural identity, religious identity, moral identity etc. There are different kinds of identity such as personal identity, role based identity, collective identity, social identity etc. Equilibrium point is a status where all identities can find meaning.

Identity is made from various domains including religion, vocation, role, relational choices, gender etc. It depends on the choices and commitments of a person. It is affected by the social and personal traits of a person. In this process values and choices of a person are reexamined.

'*This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*', is a story taken from '*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*' (1993), a collection of twenty two interconnected short stories by Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr. (1966-), a major writer from contemporary or second generation writer of Native American Renaissance Literature, of mixed descent, Spokane and Coeur'd Alene, which are ethnic minority indigenous tribes now living on reservation.

From the very beginning Native American Literature deals with historical and contemporary oppression of Indians and their quest for Identity. 20th century American literature is developed by writers of various ethnic minority groups. Since the beginning of the 20th century and reinforced by the 1970s American Indian movement, American Indian writing has contributed to the revival of American Indian ethnic identity.

It is about belonging, about what you have common with some people and what differentiates you from others. Among its different markers such as social, physical appearance, nationality, religion, family relationships, gender, and occupation, culture plays an important role. Traditionally 'Indianness' is a sense of 'peoplehood' which links it to sacred traditions, places, and shared history of indigenous people. Culturally it is a group who remembers its past, tells its stories, and interprets its myths. Aspects like culture, society, genes/biology, laws and self identity are characteristics of 'Indianness'.

Sherman Alexie with his predecessors and contemporary Indian American writers of second wave deal with the theme of Identity quest of the Indians with its numerous aspects and consequences. They realistically depict American Indian culture which is often based on autobiographical or historical experience. Alexie in one of the interviews tells that when he thinks about Indians, all he thinks about is suffering. His first measure of Indian Americans is pain and in order to preserve both their cultural and Indian identity, Native Americans must be aware of 'who' they are and where they come from? About this collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) Alexie says:

"So why am I telling you that these stories are true? First of all, they're not really true. They are the vision of one individual looking at the lives of his family and his entire tribe, so these stories are necessarily biased, incomplete, exaggerated, deluded, and often just plain wrong. But in trying to make them true and real, I am writing what might be called reservation realism.... (Alexie xxi)

This collection was awarded by PEN / Hemingway Award for the Best First Book of Fiction with praise as 'live and unremitting lyric energy'. The present story of Alexie *This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona* is a most moving story which tells essentials of the identity formation. It is taken to study how various perspectives of Native American Identity are found in them.

In this story Victor's father, Arnold has "... died of heart attack in his trailer and nobody found him for a week" (60) in Phoenix, Arizona and no one on the reservation has enough money to get there to retrieve the ashes and belongings of him, "... except for the cigarette and fireworks salespeople?" (59) Later in the same trailer where Arnold had died Victor and Thomas collected photos and stereo. Victor just has lost his job at the BIA and Tribal Council also has difficult time financially. It indicates that there is stark poverty and might be class distinction on the reservation. About his own living in poor condition Alexie says, "I knew how to live in poverty, having grown up on an American third-world reservation" (Alexie xiii)

Victor had not seen his father in a few years, only talked on the telephone once or twice, "... but there still was a genetic pain ... pain as real and immediate as a broken bone." (59) Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a childhood friend of Victor is ready to support, lending him money but on the condition that is if Victor takes him with on the trip to Phoenix. He helps Victor to retrieve his father's ashes because he sees Arnold as a father figure and hero who had saved him from the fire that killed his parents.

And one more reason for helping is when at the age of thirteen Thomas went to the Spokane and stood by the 'Falls' waiting for a sign or a vision, which he was waiting from the childhood, Arnold appeared and put his hand on Thomas' shoulder in a concern and told him that, "All you're going to get here is mugged!" (69) Then he took Thomas for breakfast and then to reservation, was a vision for Thomas, who inspired him in dreams telling "Take care of each other." (69) Arnold had asked him to take care of Victor and thus has cheated his son Victor hiding vital information in his identity formation process. So "... [Thomas] had to watch out for [Victor] as part of the deal." (70)

About the father-son relationship in this story Alexie says,

I kept trying to figure out the main topic, the big theme, the overarching idea, the epicenter. And it is this: the sons in this book really love and hate their fathers. (Alexie xxii)

At the beginning of their journey their relation is uncomfortable and frequently hostile due to their opposite personalities and feelings about Arnold. One of the central reasons for conflict between Victor and Thomas, is completely opposite opinion over Arnold, is the reason behind their different perspectives on the meaning of a father and fundamental difference in their approach, attitude and understanding of life. Both have different and opposite perspectives on the meaning of a father because both were struggling to choose their parents.

Arnold is a positive figure and much better father to Thomas than to Victor who retrieves Thomas from the city and had rescued him earlier from fire. Arnold had rescued Thomas from his orphanhood whereas Victor's experiences were both good and bad and finally abandonment. Though both grew up without parents, and had suffered from the feeling of loss, Victor struggles with this most because his knowledge is that his father has abandoned him whereas Thomas was too young when his parents died in fire and he has willingly adopted Arnold as father figure. Victor could not bear Thomas' glorification of Arnold, a father who had been drinking violently and had abandoned him when he was very young.

But during the trip Victor and Thomas bond and understand each other better, is believable character development. Their conflict resolution is a result from the reenactment of a larger society. The experiences of Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire demonstrate adolescence at their best, who struggle with the choices of their parents. These two Native adolescents are determined to find their identity or greater self in the family, a smallest but most essential unit of community, is ignored by Victor focusing selfishly only on his losses, who is emotionally absent and does not make positive contribution in it. This is more difficult for Native American youth to change society for the better which has been limited to their reservation life. Especially Victor is unsure of his place within his community and family whose relation with his mother is little balanced. Actually, in this way they are attempting to find their identity within their community.

In this story Coeur d'Alene Reservation is established as the land of privilege and narrative centre because it begins and ends with the roadside sign. The place reservation is central point for both for departure and return or homecoming to a strong Native community in the story. The term reservation is as important as the term Indian to the person's identity.

This story is identified with real experiences of Alexie, is explained by him as,

What else is true? My best friend, Steve, and I traveled to Phoenix to pick up his father's ashes just like Victor and Thomas do in 'This is What It Means to Phoenix, Arizona,' though the fictional father was much more like my father than Steve's. (Alexie xx)

Like one of the best known boy-hero myths from Native mythologies, Victor and Thomas, of same age, grown up playing together are the central but opposite characters from the same community, venture together for the same reason. And they go looking their unknown father to understand better who

they are, who their father is and why he left them. In their journey like after many adventures of mythological heroes these adolescence find out or discover their father.

During the journey Victor, a warrior learns that he and Thomas, as different as they are, have actually a lot more in common than he could have imagined. They learn much about themselves and their own identity and gradually began to reconcile these differences and acquire respect, affection, and finally overcome on them near the conclusion. Their friendship is united, reborn and some episodes of their earlier life are recounted, prompting Victor to remember all the good times they had together. He remembers how Thomas had helped to free him from a nasty underground wasp nest. He asks Thomas to tell him a story as a way of reminiscing.

Thomas a crazy storyteller likes to tell stories whether anyone listens or not, who closes his eyes while telling the same stories over and over again. Thomas, a visionary storyteller links ancestral tradition of Indian culture to present, suggesting Victor to throw his father's ashes in the Spokane River so that his " ... father will rise like a salmon ... and find his way home ... His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow", (74) because "Nothing stops...." (75) He decides to toss the ashes of Victor's father, given by Victor, as recompense, in Spokane Falls, because finally Victor had given Thomas half of the ashes and had agreed to share his father with him. This acceptance of Thomas by Victor as family is the first step to find his place in the community. He does not tell Thomas that Arnold accidentally killed his parents by starting the house fire and protects Thomas from emotional harm of losing a father figure.

Alexie, has written a screenplay for a feature film *Smoke Signals* (1998), loosely based on a few stories from *The Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, specifically on, *This What It Means to Be a Phoenix Arizona*. Chris Iyer (Cheyenne and Arapahoe), a Native American filmmaker and director of *Smoke Signals* promoted film as Alexie also has claimed "...the first feature film written, directed and co-produced by Indians to ever receive a major distribution deal." (Berglund 102-3) He broke the barriers by creating this first all-Indian movie. It won the Audience Award and the Filmmaker's Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 and nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.

It is a Buddy movie, "...in which two same-sex characters gradually acquire respect and affection for each other, finally overcoming their differences to bond near the film's conclusion." (Berglund 97)

Smoke Signals the title of the film indicates that the characters of Alexie refuse to accept non-Native definitions of an authentic Indian. The entire film mocks at Hollywood stereotypes and challenges to both literary and cinematic conventions. In this film Alexie mocks romanticized images of Indians as both stoic and savage warriors while also noticing the way that these representations influence the self-images of individual Indians. Male characters of Alexie are neither stoic warrior nor buffalo hunters, as well as his female characters are neither princesses nor squaws, the two prevailing identities that non-Indian impose on Native women.

The reference of salmon is a metaphor for both the Spokane tribal people and the loss of a traditional way of life. It emphasizes the fact that salmon returns to the place of birth to die. Arnold's death in the Phoenix has disrupted

this cycle who never returned to the reservation but was always trying to get home though failed in his struggle. This cycle is completed by boys returning his ashes to the reservation especially to the river. After his death in the Phoenix Arnold was cremated and his ashes were waiting for boys to retrieve who ultimately ends in reservation.

This is an allusion of Phoenix, a metaphorical bird who rises again and again from the ashes. Victor and Thomas like two brothers of the mythic story are in search of their father ultimately discover a star or the sun in the form of remains. Alexie has used this imagery as a metaphor for both the Spokane tribal people and the loss of traditional way of life. It is fact that salmon returns to the place of his birth to die. About Arnold this cycle is complete when boys bring his ashes to the reservation, more importantly, the river. In the story three things reborn like phoenix from the ashes, are relationship of Victor and Thomas, Indian tradition, and Indian spirit of Victor's father.

Before Arnold left his family for Arizona and died there Thomas had known that Victor's father was going to leave their family. He also had known that he has died and he will have to help Victor to bring his ashes back. He, "... heard it on the wind. [He] heard from the birds. [He] felt it in the sunlight." (61) In one of the stories two Indian boys had become warrior. Thomas, "...learned a thousand stories before [he] took [his] first thousand steps." Thomas a crazy story teller talked to dogs and cars and listened to wind and pine trees. Thus the stories of Thomas add essentials to the Identity formation of both of them, who try to change society for the better.

For Native Americans stories or folklores are the collection of culture and traditional oral narratives, which preserve and transmit passages of prayers, historical events, communal values, and cultural practices from one generation to the next. It is not just speaking and listening to the language but a living process which has spiritual energy and can be exchanged. Alexie pulls these complex emotions together in simple symbolic sentences.

Thomas who annoys people with his incessant historical or mystical tales is the symbol of traditional culture, "...got into a fistfight. That Victor was really drunk and beat Thomas up for no reason at all." (Alexie 65) Under the influence of alcohol, a white cultural symbol of alcohol, Victor, the young Indian everyman, attacks the symbol of thousands of years of Native American tradition.

Alcohol nearly becomes another character throughout the story. Characters in the story measure their lives by whether events happened before or after they had their first taste of alcohol. Alcoholism is fatalistic, part of life, and irresistible temptation on the reservation. Some writers have speculated that alcohol abuse has become an identifying trait among American Indians and has been associated with the search for transcendental expressions. "The only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams." (74)

It is a crucial part of the identities of the Alexie's characters that they care deeply about other Indians, even if they have just met. "Whatever happened to tribal ties, the sense of community?" (74) There are several incidents in the book during which the characters remind each other and the audience that they are Indians, as if their identities may be in doubt because they do not look, act, live or talk like stereotypical cinematic Indians.

In this story images of Native women are more significant and powerful, as advisors, guides and catalysts. In media they are misrepresented, promoted stereotypically, are artificial and commodity. Victor's mother is a powerful woman. Norma Many Horses in this story stops Victor from beating Thomas is powerful Indian woman. If ignored she would have picked up the boys, smashed their skulls and would have dragged them to listen some dusty old stories from elder. "I was sorry for beating you up that time." (67)

Native American people held nature in great respect. They believe that spiritual forces are present in all the elements of nature, even in living creatures and inanimate objects also. While returning from Phoenix when Thomas started driving, a jackrabbit was crushed under the wheels of the pickup. It was may be only alive thing in the whole state of Nevada. Thomas thought it was suicide.

All major traits of Native American Identity are found in this one of the pivotal stories. Native life being limited only to reservation becomes more difficult for them. When any Samuel breaks this bar for outer world then he returns only in the form of ashes. The barren area and death of the bird in returning journey symbolizes life of Indians outside reservation as devoid of identity, and at the point of death on the one hand. On the other reservation Indians though living in difficulty are hopeful, sets to search them out and succeeds in it.

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