Chapter Four
Sherman Alexie

The present chapter revolves around another Native American poet, Sherman Alexie, who is a feminist despite being a man. Therefore, he shares some feminist trends with Allen and Harjo. However, he differs in his concerns from the other two poets. While the first two poets attempt to restore woman’s voice to the scene of literature, Alexie does not care so much about this. Thus his poetry is marked with the dominance of the male voice mostly in the figure of a father. A majority of his poems are either by a father figure or about a father; even when a man is speaking, his role as son or father is implied in the poems. But Alexie’s male voice lacks the gender-oriented discriminatory features of a male figure, hence his feminism. This chapter analyzes some of his poems selected from two works, *Face* and *Old Shirts and White Skins*, in the line of the general argument of the thesis. Also the Chapter deals with differences between Alexie, Allen, and Harjo while referring to some of their resemblances. Like Allen and Harjo, Alexie is a mixed-blood. But as compared to them, he has less knowledge of a Native language. As compared to Allen and Harjo who try to do away with the patterns of identity imposed by the West and restore a tribal identity, Alexie is less concerned with the necessity or usefulness of boundaries which define identities which is essentially his worldview. In this view, he is more a postmodern than a postcolonial poet. James Clifford has argued that identity need not be predicated on the sort of boundaries of race which have defined Indians. “What if identity is conceived not as a boundary to
be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological” (1995, 22; qtd. in Porter and Roemer 78). Alexie, the poet, is the product of these interactions.

Alexie reaffirms Native lives and Native nationhood. He emphasises less on the cultural dynamics of tribal life and reflects his own mixed engagements with mainstream and native cultures. And this is reflected in his worldviews too.

Technically also, Alexie’s poetry is singled out by his stylistic or thematic experimentations. His poetry is at times a hybrid of prose and poetry like Harjo’s and at other times, it is the sole versification of some experiences. His themes vary from general socio-political issues to the most private matters. He experiments with a theme by weaving narratives within narratives, shedding light on different aspects of the main issue. What is particular about his poetry is that in his poems, Alexie intertwines his Native American worldviews with his everyday personal experiences. This accounts for the kind of intimacy he strikes upon with his audience in his poetry by giving voice to his family members, his wife and son. The present study approaches these characteristics as Alexie’s postmodern strategies to do away with formal and informal boundaries in poetic tone and present his worldview. Deconstructing the norms of poeticization and interweaving the personal with the public issues are points of divergences that mark Alexie’s poetic creativity as distinct from Allen’s and Harjo’s. This chapter concentrates on Alexie’s poetry as a different embodiment of Native American worldview both in technique and subject matter.
Introduction and Literature Review

Sherman Joseph Alexie was born in 1966 into the Spokane /Coeur d’Alene tribe. He grew up on the Spokane reservation in Wellpinit. He went to Gonzaga University in Spokane on scholarship from 1985 to 1987 and transferred to Washington State University in Pullman and studied there from 1988 to 1991. He was awarded his degree in 1995 by the same university. He began writing poetry in a workshop, being encouraged by his teacher, Alex Kuo at WSU. In 1991, he received the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship and the National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship in 1992. Numerous literary nominations, honors, and awards would follow as Alexie began his prolific literary career. He won not only national fame but also celebrity status. Like Harjo, he has established national reputation as a multi-media performer. Unlike the serious tone of Harjo and Allen, Alexie’s is a humorous one and thus embodies his Native wit. This highlights the status of Alexie as a poet since it attracts attentions to Native witticism which has long been ignored. Irony is one of the poetic devices upon which Alexie draws heavily to give his work a humorous tone. In poetry he has been influenced by great Native poets like Leslie M. Silko, Adrian C. Louis, Simon J. Ortiz, and Luci Tapahonso. Also he alludes to colonial poets like Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg.

Alexie started his literary career as a poet but then he turned to works of fiction also. His 1990s stories garnered a great deal of attention. He published a collection of stories under the title The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in the Heaven (1993) for which he received a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction, the Great Lakes
College Association Best First Book of Fiction Award, and a Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Award. In 1993, he published two poetry volumes, *Old Shirts and New Skins*, and *First Indian on the Moon*. He published two novels, *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996). As observed by James Ruppert, Alexie’s fiction is marked by a “decidedly anti-romantic view of Native life and of the everyday’s struggle to survive. His reservation dwellers do not contemplate myth or pronounce wisdom about nature” (Porter and Roemer 184). For the first novel, Alexie received the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie draws upon gothic horror which he borrows from Allen Poe and other American writers of the grotesque. Alexie represents the grotesque violence as the violence perpetrated on the Natives by the colonists. His 2000 collection of stories, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, explores the contemporary urban Indian middle-class with humor, irony and sympathy. In the June 1999 summer fiction issue of *The New Yorker*, his name was among the “twenty best young fiction writers in America today” (Buford 65).

In 1996, he published another poetry volume entitled *The Summer of Black Widows*. In 1998, he published the limited edition of poetry *The Man Who Loves Salmon*, followed by *Smoke Signals: The Screenplay*. When the latter was released at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1998, it won two awards: the Audience Award and the Filmmakers Trophy. After wide release, the film received a Christopher Award for an artistic work that “affirm the highest values of the human spirit” (Rani in Hollrah 123). He published another collection of poetry, *One Stick Song*, in 2000 along with another collection of short stories, *The Toughest
Indian in the World. In 2002, he wrote and directed The Business of Fancydancing which won numerous film festival awards.

Alexie shares feminism with Harjo and Allen. Like them, he regrets his people having assimilated into sexism and misogyny. Referring to this, he continues, “As with anything else, women always have power. Women are the creators. We get into trouble when we try to deny that. So I’m angry toward this patriarchal country that creates an environment totally hostile to women” (Bellante 15; in Hollrah 121). Further, in Chato Interview, he acknowledges, “Indian women are the reason Indian cultures have survived” (Hollrah 122).

David L. Moore aptly describes Alexie’s popular persona as a “comedian, poetry bout heavyweight, experimental writer, filmmaker, and social pundit” (Porter and Roemer 297). Like many other Native figures, Alexie reaffirms Native lives and Indian nationhood. Unlike most Indian poets, he does not point toward the redemptive power of Native community as a source of inspiration for his protagonists. That makes his worldview distinct from Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo. David L. Moore is of the view that Alexie’s Old Shirts and White Skins is based on the crucial equation of poetry with anger multiplied by imagination. Anger is “a positive force for Alexie [which] resonates with passion, authenticity, and the bodily intimacy of sweat and contact” (Moore in Porter and Roemer 299). His anger is a gesture to oppressive elements: “I pull out my wallet and give them a buck each. I don’t feel generous or guilty, just half-empty and all lonely in this city which would kill me as slowly as it is killing these three cousins of mine” (qtd. in Moore 299). In Moore’s words, the “liberating value of IMAGINATION is amplified by its absence in a brutal opposite” (299).
Alexie presents a number of concerns in his poems such as nature, technology, drinking, politics and religion et cetera. Like other natives, he has a belief that man’s life is dependent upon nature and its elements. This worldview is at the fore in many of his poems. Like many other Indian American writers inspired by N. Scott Momaday, Alexie is aware of and utilizes the power of the word; yet while a poet like Harjo deploys this power to retain her Native traditions and matrilineal myths, Alexie targets this power at the white American as well as at the rallying voice of anger and righteousness of despondent Native youth. Thus his irony is forked; on the one hand, he criticizes harshly the non-Natives for their complicity in colonization; on the other hand, he challenges the myopic nativism of his own people. His postcolonialism mostly resembles that of Fanon. In contrast to the clarity of Harjo and Allen, Alexie adopts ambiguity, multiplicity, and irony in his stylistic as well as thematic concerns even when he deals with tribal sovereignty. This renders him similar to postmodern poets rather than Native resistant figures. This is the strategy he chooses against the colonial oppression as he has said in an interview, “I always want to be a moving target” (qtd. in Moore 302). The slippery feature, which he covets as an Indian, accounts for his postmodern interplays in his poetry, especially in his narrative poems. Besides, a “moving target” lacks the fixity that nativists desire against the colonists. Also, it puzzles the colonial for its slipperiness. Thus in both worlds, Alexie is an alienated Native poet. He is not claimed by nativists for his slipperiness, nor is he acclaimed by the colonists for his resisting strategies against colonization. Suspending between the two worlds, Alexie is a hybrid; yet his hybridity is not the same as Bhabha has
defined. Although Bhabhalian hybridity emerges out of the interplay between codes of two distinct realms of the colonizer and the colonized, it is presented as being depoliticized. By contrast, Alexie’s hybridity is a forked weapon targeted at both the Natives and the Americans. He does not approve of Indians’ exaggeration or romanticization of their sufferings under the atrocities of the colonizers; nor does he appreciate the immediate products of colonization, the mimic men, who dehistoricize their roles and identities in the colonial encounter. Alexie develops an individual consciousness which is aware of both worlds and does not abide by the demands of either. His singular consciousness suffers alienation from both worlds and simultaneously has full mastery over the two, hence its gesture to freedom.

Ignoring this point, some Indian critics criticize Alexie for his laxities as a Native literary figure. Louis Owens writes that Alexie’s humor “deflects any ‘lesson in morality’” (76). Gloria Bird declares his characters as “social and cultural anomalies” (49). For Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Alexie neglects art as “an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic” (126). Against such accusations, Joseph L. Coulombe draws upon Kenneth Lincoln’s explication on the contrary powers of Indian humor which ambivalently heals and hurts, bonds and exorcizes, renews and purges (Lincoln 95; Bloom 94). Coulombe contends Alexie’s sophisticated use of humor “unsettles conventional ways of thinking and compels re-evaluation and growth, which ultimately allows Indian characters to connect to their heritage in novel ways and forces non-Indian readers to reconsider simplistic generalizations” (in Bloom 94). Likewise, this detailed analysis of Alexie’s poems shows the
sense of responsibility he nurtures as an Indian poet and also present his worldview. Besides, his playfulness which is at times in charge of his stylistic experimentalism in some of his poems accentuates his stance as a politically involved and concerned poet who is fully aware of the cultural demands and lapses of his hybrid context.

Alexie shares his being a mixed-blood with many other Indian poets like Harjo and Allen. Like them, he is a hybrid figure who celebrates his hybrid condition and tries to make the most possible use of this hybridity in the line of his resisting objectives. Writing with a firm social and moral purpose, he makes all readers –Indian and non-Indian – aware of the common space they all share, and helps them appreciate their shared humanity. In an interview, he explains his conviction:

I think there are three stages of Indian-ness: The first stage is when you feel inferior because you’re Indian, and most people never leave it. The next stage is feeling superior because you’re Indian and a small percentage of people get into that and most never leave it. At the end, they get on realizing that Indians are just as fucked up as everybody else. No better no worse. I try to be in that stage. (Torrez Interview 1999).

Discussion and Analysis

This comparative study selects poems from Old Shirts and White Skins and Face. In his foreword to Old Shirts, Adrian C Louis rightly notes that “Many of the poems in this collection turn on an axis of irony” (qtd. in Evans 48). Louis observes that Alexie’s voice “transgresses both
genres and periods of tribal literature” (qtd. in Evans 48). The positive, salvific quality of this volume lies in the essentially Native worldview it nourishes; in Louis’s words, “these poems bind us to the present, yet at the same time connect us to the ancestral voices of our past” (qtd. in Evans 48).

Most of the analyzed poems are chosen from *Face*; the analysis is in the line of the general argument of the thesis. Here Alexie deals with different subject matters as various as nature, drinking, politics, technology, religion, etc. He targets his criticism at the Indian new generation that has succumbed to the enticements of the white settlers. *Face* shares some thematic concerns with the ironical and satirical collection, *Old Shirts and White Skins*. This chapter draws a comparative line between these two collections by pinpointing their thematic similarities.

*Face* starts with “Avian Nights” in which Sherman aptly draws comparisons between starlings and Natives. What is particular about Alexie’s treatment of nature in his poetry is that he utilizes nature and natural models to write on human life, especially the colonial encounter. In this first poem, he compares man’s relation and ignorance toward the starlings to the colonists’ indifference toward fate and rights of Indians. The poem narrates the story of how starlings that had nested in their house disturbed them, especially their sick son and how he along with his wife got exterminators to get rid of the whole nest. In the evening when the parents of the birds come to find the nest with the chicks gone they make a howl for whole three nights. The male speaker contemplates over the starlings and finds out many similarities between himself and them;
like the grief-stricken starlings, he and his wife “attack the walls of the ICU” where they have kept the sick son “with human wings” (13). Like the starlings, “we cawed and cawed to bring him back” to life. The comparison is an attack on Western extermination which likewise ravaged the Indians out of their natural habitats: “We killed their children. We started this war./ Tell me: what is the difference between /Birds and us, between their pain and our pain/. . . /Dumb birds, dumb starlings, dumb men, dumb women?” (13). When the speaker asks if birds celebrate births of their children or if they lust and take each other to bed or how they bury their dead, he is actually presenting how the humans are strange to the world of the birds; similarly, Alexie implies how the worlds of the Indians is unfamiliar to the Western colonizer: “We will never know how this winged mother/ and father would have buried their children” (12). The speaker talks of death of his son at birth: “At birth, our son suffocated, his breath/ Stolen as he swallowed his own shit” (12). Symbolically, this could stand for the fatal/deadly wastes that the Indian have become under the impacts of the West, marking their spiritual death. Although technology has been of help to restore the dead son to life, the son has been a dead alive, “spent the next five weeks/ flat on his back” (12-13). The paralytic state of the son can signify the paralysis of the Natives’ new generation under the impacts of the colonists.

“Volcano” symbolizes the natural irruption of a volcano to Western colonization: “But as a fucking volcano threatened/ To turn us Indian kids into French fries” (14). Turning the Indian kids into French fries can be taken as imposing on them some French identity codes. It is a piece made of prose and poem. In the first part which is a poem, the speaker relates
the time of volcanic eruption when he along with other kids were playing. In the following prose part he recounts how he suffered the attacks of mosquitoes having changed his skin color: “And then I’d be the brown boy turned white from the calamine lotion” (15). Calamine lotion is a Western commodity which on the red skin of the boy changes his skin to white. This appropriated color is an artificial one like the French fires form that is imposed on them by the volcanic eruption. In the prose part, Alexie tells how the mosquitoes vanished due to the ash fall. In the following poem part, he identifies the Indians to the “wasted away” mosquitoes whose faith in some God has been of no use, and they might have got a new faith “created/ From the ash” (15). What interlinks the mosquitoes to Indians could be their faith in blood: “What if they [mosquitoes] sang high-pitched songs about blood/ And the memory of blood?” (15). The memory of blood implies the predicament of modernized Indians who have lost their traditions in the face of the colonial legacy. Yet Alexie perceives some hope in these Indians when he opens the possibility of sort of resurrection: “What if one/Mosquito rose out of its ashy tomb/ And flew into the glorious sunlight?” (15). With an eye kept on the West, the speaker threateningly raises the possibility of another irruption on the part of the mosquitoes, hence addressing the colonizers, he asks: “O, how would your world change if you knew/ Mosquitoes believed in resurrection?” (15).

“In the Matter of Human v. Bees” Alexie holds the Native belief that man’s life is dependent upon nature and its elements. The speaker
refers to cell phones or diseases as the possible reasons for the disappearance of the bees. With the disappearance of the bees, flora and then animals will also perish away (24).

The second section of the collection, *Face*, contains some poems starting with “Dangerous Astronomy” that centers on man-nature relation. In this poem the speaker is a father intending to “walk outside and praise the stars” (41). Feeling dull and jealous as the father who has no role in mother-son relation, he feels “less important than the farthest star”; so he decides to walk out and praise the stars. In this relation, however, instead of feeling fraternity, or at least sympathy, with the stars, he feels he is more important than them. What Alexie implies here is detecting the roots of man’s fake sense of superiority over nature. He thus views man’s superiority rooted in his subordination or marginalization in human bonds, just like the father who feels neglected by his wife nursing the son, hence dangerous astronomy. Politically speaking, this poem embodies a Fanonian psychoanalytical analysis of colonization. Inferiority complexes in personal relations lead to brutal social relations between self and other, especially if the other is defined in terms of sex, race, and gender. Thus social relations are politicized when the inferiorized self attempts to regain its lost balance in claiming mastery over the other. The title of the poem is an indication to the dangers that arise out of dissatisfaction of self’s desires in private bonds. The speaker’s manliness is not acknowledged by his wife who is now busy with the son. He maneuvers his manliness in dangerous explorations in the realm of others. In this way, Alexie utilizes a man’s relation with the far stars to detect and analyze man’s colonial urges.
“Naked and Damp, with a Towel around My Head, I Noticed Movement on the Basement Carpet” is expressive of Alexie’s Native American worldview about man’s kinship with animals around him. The speaker resents his house being attacked and usurped by little ants. He tries to kill them like a colonizer but in vain. First he calls them, “the little red bastards” (94); then recalling his poverty-stricken days in the reservations, he shifts back to his true Indian identity which draws a sibling relation with man and animals calling the ants as “his sacred little cousins”. He revises himself, “My war/With the ants was blasphemous” (94), as it is a “genocide”: “Shouldn’t I share my home’s walls, ceilings, and floors/ With an hungry soul?” (94). He finds himself resembling the colonizers who have similarly pushed him and his tribe out of their homeland, “I protected my home, my walls, ceilings, and floors./Because the rich must always make war on the poor” (94). The oscillations that the male speaker undergoes with respect to the ants – first he approaches them as an exterminator but then he sympathizes and even identifies with them – manifest the many tensions that occur in the mind of the Indian poet caught up in the hybrid Third Space. In such a tensed situation, the tilt of the speaker toward his Indianness reflects the rootedness of his Native worldview in contrast to the superficiality of the identity imposed on him by the colonist.

“Small Ceremonies” is Alexie’s expression of man-nature conflict, the insistence of man on destruction of a spider’s web for a whole week, and the resistance of the spider to reconstruct the web every time after its destruction (109).
In “Crow Boom”, Alexie most vividly reveals his Native American worldview on man’s kinship to nature, animals and plants. The speaker is a poet who delves into philosophic thoughts as he observes a crow grabbing a robin and eating it before his eyes. He asks the question, “Did that crow,/Like human hunters,/Believe it absorbed /The dead robin’s soul/By eating its brain?” (105). Then he goes on to describe his own situation as a human being, who is not a hunter, “But I need to eat /What my hunters kill” (106). So he praises hunters for delivering food for him; then he praises food, all food “because /All food is holy” (106). Then he praises the robin that died for the crow, “Because every piece /Is holy” (60). For him grease is holy, so praiseworthy. The same stands true to vegetables, every seed, every grain is holy. He praises everything including death (106). In death, he sees himself feeding bacteria, flies, beetles, wasps, and mites, so he himself becomes food for many. Then he sees himself having become part of the crow and the robin. “I hope that my soul, /Masculine and vain, /Becomes oxygen/Or a good hard rain” (107). For him arrogance is praiseworthy just as he praises his race with “dark brow/ With our crow-black hair. /I praise our cock struts/And avian sneers,/Because I’m in love/With our terrible/And tender world” (107). Finally, he worships crows for reminding men “To be better men,/Stuffed with songs of praise/And quickened by faith” (108).

“On the Second Anniversary of My Father’s Death” recounts the story of a bird that smashes his head against the window of the speaker’s house. Not learning lesson from the failure, the bird returns every other morning to do the same. His wife takes that bird as his late father. When he is away his wife tells him the bird returned after two days with a
sparrow that twittered, as if laughing, while the bird smashed his head against the glass. He then learns that the bird smashed its head against the windows of all the houses across the street. In the prose part, he says, “If that bird is my father, then it is also father to every other child in this neighborhood” (115). Contemplating on the bird, he identifies himself with the bird, “Do I see my father in that bird because I see myself in that bird? In my grief and rage, have I grown wings and the need to destroy my own collection? Do I want to destroy my face because it looks so much like my father’s face?” (115). The attacking bird can stand for the tribal life he used to have as his Law of the Father. The bird is trying to remind the speaker of his past identity, while the speaker thinks it wants to destroy its face. Destroying its face implies its rage against itself for not being good enough to keep its believers to itself.

The theme of nature receives attention in Alexie’s other collection, *White Shirts and Old Skins*, yet in another tone. “Nature Poem” is the poet’s response to the question that epigraphically appears at the beginning of the poem, “If you are an Indian, why don’t you write nature poetry?” (24). The poem relates a scene where the Indian fire fighters are caught in the middle ring of fire. To save themselves from fire, they dig a hole, “pretending to be roots/or gophers” (24). In the hole, the smoke chokes them all. The Indians are in the bosom of the nature that has been destroyed, set on fire (by the settlers). Their only shelter has been the earth which turns into their grave. This symbolic poem counterargues the stereotypical view of Indian poets as nature poets; the stereotype suffocates the Indian poet just as the earth has chocked the firefighters.

Religion and religious discourse is the other important theme that
receives critical expression in Alexie’s poetry. In “The Seven Deadly Sins of Marriage”, Alexie rewrites the Christian religious commands in a new way, both contemporizing and domesticating them. The poem consists of seven parts, each one dealing with each deadly sin in the familial, matrimonial context. Such contemporization gives the whole poem a humorous tone which problematizes the seriousness of the religious discourse. Envy is viewed in the light of his wife’s previous lovers who should have aroused envy in him but instead make him feel good about himself, “I celebrate the men who preceded me./ . ./Because they make me look so much better” (56). “Pride” depicts being wife to a husband who is a writer gives one no sense of pride at all, since it is only the wife who knows the weaknesses of writers as men: “We writers are the worst kind of cruel,/ Because we worship our own stories and poems,/ . ./ . . .We are word-whores,/ . ./ . / We’d have sex with our books, if only we could” (56-7). “Gluttony” is about the speaker who is obese but “can’t stick with any weight loss plan” (57). However, because his wife feels OK with the way he looks, he does not bother about it so much, “Because wives can love beyond the body/And make mortal husbands feel holy” (57). “Lust” is addressed to his beloved wife and instead of condemning it as a sin, he celebrates and glorifies it (59). “Wrath” is a narrative of one sleepless night he had in a hotel room being disturbed by noisy women next door. He calls it an “adolescent rage” which is received indifferently by his wife who simply “shrugs, rolls her eyes, and turns the page” (59). This domesticated way of treating the most horrible and punishment-arousing part of the Western religious discourse has a countersigning influence upon the religious discourse.
Alexie’s deconstruction of religious discourse continues right in the following poem, “The Soul Selects Her Own Society”, which is a line quoted from Emily Dickinson (60). Clearly, the speaker attacks religions, “entire religions/Have been created because of misprints, mis-/Takes, and misappropriated blame” (60). Then the speaker make an example of the way Christianity has got misinterpreted. Claiming that Jesus has never said “‘It’ better to give/Than to receive’”, he contends that it is nothing other than heresy, “a reasonable judge would throw out Paul’s testimony / As hearsay, which is cousin to heresy” (60). The Native American poet’s reinterpretation of colonial religious discourse assigns him a political position. He even goes so far as accusing Paul of misusing his status as a saint: “Don’t you think that Paul, in a moment/ Of self-doubt, when he thought that he was losing /Authority, might have misattributed a quote to Jesus?” (60). Contemporizing his point regarding religion and its unreliability, he refers to his favorite song, PJ Harvey’s “I Bring You My Love”, and states it is sacred for him who loves the song; but if somebody else listens to it and does not like it, “Then I am guilty of bad taste and worse theology/ And will become yet another unreliable narrator” (61). He justifies his point by referring to Jesus’s speech, “faith and doubt are twins”. He ends the poem by putting under question people’s belief is Jesus, “Can you believe in a messiah who preaches in oxymorons” (61).

*Old Shirts & New Skins* also deals with the question of religion. “Old and New Testament” is about the encounters that the speaker repeatedly has with a priest on Wednesdays. The priest asks him the usual questions, “How do you do?” or “Brother, are you saved?” (26). The speaker follows the white priest in the snow to ask him his questions
which always remain unheard. The priest stands for colonial religion which only pretends to care for “others”. The priest’s asking a repetitious question signifies the monotonies and formalities of the religious discourse behind which there lies no real care for others. This is well reflected in the ignorance of the priest who does not wait to get the answers to his questions and just goes on his own way. Nor does the priest wait to answer the many questions the speaker is at grapple with. Thus the role of the priest and the religion he stands for is undermined. Caught in the snow, the speaker trudges back to his small apartment with bluish feet. The speaker can hold belief only in things he owns, “believing in everything I own, I stand at the window/ watching one city block turning into another/. . .forgiving/everything I see, forgiving my inadequate god” (26). The fact the speaker returns home empty-handed with his questions unanswered by the priest accounts for his turn to his “inadequate god” which at least justifies his identity through his belongings.

In the same collection, there is another poem which targets the colonial figure of Jesus Christ contrasting him to an Indian idler named Lester. “The Unauthorized Biography of Lester Fallsapart” is a brief view of the way an unknown Indian man leads his life, wasting away himself in drinks and gambling, wandering in streets, homeless. He is born on Christmas Day (46). The date of his birth is significant as it shows the religious identity of Christ who was born on the same day. Lester typifies the Native American Christ who remains nameless. He is nameless because his name is “unpronounceable in English and Indian” (46). Like the colonial Christ, his name means “He Who Hunts with a Crooked
Bow”. The speaker simply calls him, instead, Lester. Dated 1979, Lester is found in the dumpster reservation, “shoved into a bottle/of Thunderbird Wine” (46). Lester lives homelessly; he sleeps with dogs and collects cans on the roadsides (47). He takes the wandering dog as his cousin and when he is crushed by a logging truck, he “wept and refused to leave/his body in the ditch” (47). In 1966, the post office refuses to deliver Lester’s mail “because he lived in a tipi” (47). In the “dead letter box” he had collected all his life (47). The speaker typifies Lester and unites him globally with all other oppressed when he says, “In your mind/Viet Nam & the reservation/fancy dance together” (48). The unemployed wanderer has tried to find himself a job, but “Nothing left/on the reservation” (48). He refuses to carry burdens, “There are things I won’t do/ no matter how hungry I get” (49). He does some petty jobs, like carrying groceries for women who pay him a few dollars; old men give him “a shot/ from their whiskey bottles/ in a tribal gesture” (49). Lester still holds his tribal features like singing songs and drumming, while he gambles, “roll the dice/ pass GO/& collect his $200./ Day by day/ he survives/ this way” (50).

Through the plight of Lester, Alexie criticizes not only the colonizers but also the colonized for having yielded to the oppression. Like Harjo who specifically deals with alcoholism, Alexie also targets the Natives for their drinking. “The Blood Sonnets” draws on Alexie’s autobiographical notes of his disintegrated family in the presence of an alcoholic father. The speaker is the father-missing son whose nose-bleeds for the absence of his drunk father. He alludes to Hamlet by comparing himself to the colonial tragic hero, “I had become the rez Hamlet who
missed /His father so much that he bled red ghosts” (48). Such a comparison is Alexie’s adaptation of the colonial narrative into his postcolonial situation. This sounds like parody the deconstructive forces of which Bhabha cherishes in the colonial encounter. Moreover, talking of Hamlet as bleeding red ghosts and comparing this to his nose-bleeding is both humorous and at the same time deconstructive; it understates the grandeur of the colonial tragic hero, with all its Aristotelian features, his nobility, greatness, and solemnity. The same de-totalizing impact occurs to the father figure: Hamlet’s kingly father turns into a drunk father who has left his family. Alexie not only deploys Shakespearean allusions, but he also adopts Shakespearean sonnet forms for his “The Blood Sonnets”; even the title itself is suggestive of many postcolonial features; while Shakespearean sonnets are mostly love sonnets, Alexie’s are “Blood” sonnets, which yokes with itself into the text not only violence but also blood- and race-based discriminations. This highly politicizes the Native American poet’s work.

In the second section, Alexie turns away from the serious tone of the first part and talks of how Ellen experienced her first menstruation. Menstrual blood of the second section runs encounter to the parodic nose-bleeding of the first part; such a contrast sheds light on both sides, hence a forked parody.

While in the Western Christian culture, woman’s menstruation is a belittling event which makes the woman an impure being who should be avoided by men, in Alexie’s Native tradition, it is celebrated as a sign of creation. Ellen’s first experience gives him and her laughter, “so I laugh, separated / By my gender, but also created/ By my mother’s blood, so I
am, by birth,/ A part of all Women’s blood and mirth” (49).

In the third sonnet, Alexie concerns himself with blood of a mother rat. Allusively, this sonnet brings again Hamlet’s story, when Alexie writes, “If rats have ghosts/ Then I shall be haunted by the small bones/Of the rats who died in their mother’s womb” (49). Although the scene of shoveling and burying the dead rat is disgusting to the speaker, being an Indian who feels for all creatures, taking them as his equal he pays his due respect to the dead rat saying that, “even the vermin need our prayers” (49). The fourth sonnet is on his sexual intercourse with his girlfriend (50).

The last sonnet again goes back to the father story when he is dead and his mother “(now married/ To dirt)” (50). The blood in this sonnet is the blood of his cousins’ hands, blistered while shoveling and burying the dead father. They hug the mother and leave their blood on her coat. The tone of the sonnet gets so much embittered when the speaker refers to violence perpetrated on them, “one shovel punch/ To my teeth, one punch to my mother’s neck, /One punch each to my brothers’ sparrow chests, /The fifth and sixth to snap my sisters’ backs/ Grief, you killer, riddler, giver of tests” (50). In the concluding couplets of the sonnet and “The Blood Sonnets”, the speaker directs a question at the colonialist, “If we lie with our father in the mud, /Will you make us a gift out of his blood?” (50). Lying with father has two connotations: one is homoerotic which runs against the moral ethos of the Indians and thus it stands for the most obscene sins in their worldview. In this sense, lying with one’s father shows how the West has degraded the native pushing them to their moral limits. From this homoerotic perspective, the postcolonial poet is casting
doubts on the colonial son-father relation in Hamlet: the son’s attraction by the ghost of the father and his fatal revenge has some homoerotic tinges especially that the treacherous mother figure is hated in this relation. Opening the lens of Hamlet’s homosexuality could stand for Alexie’s postcolonial strategy of “writing back to the empire”, re-projecting the same demoralizing perspective onto the colonists. The other connotation of lying with father is dying and getting buried with the dead father which means genocide of which the West could never be exempted historically. Making a gift out of father’s blood is the extreme point of violence; here gift could have both a sacrificial and treacherous significance. As a sacrifice, the father is killed for the sake of the sons; in its treacherous connotation, the father’s blood in the sexual intercourse is turned into something pleasant presented as a gift to the betraying sons.

In his other collection, White Shirts and Old Skins, drinking is also dealt with by Alexie in a cynical way. In “Physical Education”, Alexie represents how drink, a colonial legacy, had destroyed his father. His father had a sober friend called Eugene. The childish eye of the narrator sees his father and Eugene growing old while drinking and wasting their physical abilities, hence their lives were “blackened by whiskey” (10). The son remembers “the old/memories of missed free throws, memories of the old /days/ when an Indian basketball player could be Jesus” (10). the son witnesses how Eugene and his father “leaned into the key, their bodies, against time” (10). The doomed end of both drunks is death. The son’s attempts to rescue “those days from the ash” remain vain (11).

Apart from drinking and its devastating impact on Indian families, Alexie’s poetry gives different visions of the father figure in different
situations. His male speaker is mostly a contemplating father or a questing son. In “The Father and the Son Road Show” the poet centers on the father figure, standing for the old generation, on the verge of death because of kidney failure. The father has an amputated foot, hence disabled like the new generation. The speaker puts blame on his father for the mess they are facing now in their life confessing: “I wish / I could hate my father and his weakness” (16). He takes his father, a forced and displaced labor, as a godly figure, a poet, an artist: “my father mowed the lawn/Like van Gogh painted and spread free gravel/ On the driveway like God created dawn” (16). Then he speaks of how he found his father missing in their life and their agony, “how often I woke to find him gone, /Fleeing the child he loved but could not feed” (16). The son, himself a father to his son, plays the two roles of father and son concurrently. He returns to his primitive traditions and sees himself as “a primitive: I hunt and gather; / I build totems and pyramids; I’m fur/ And claw; I believe animals can talk; / I know the world is flat; I’m the cur/ Raised by wolves; I worship corn, leaf, and stalk” (17). Such descriptions shift back the speaker to their traditions. Suspended between the two roles, he states: “I huddle alone in caves/ And pray to my ten thousand gods; I pray/ To my father’s ten thousand gods; I pray/ To my son’s twenty thousand gods” (17). The multiplication of the son’s gods as twenty thousand gods signifies the impacts of the modern life on the Natives’ new generation. The predicament that Indians are at grapple with is best implied in the state of the father caught between the two roles of son and father: “As father and father-son separated,/ Loose, broken, dissolved by dialysis” (17).
“Gentrification” is a comment on the co-existence of whites and blacks, while the comfort of the white comes from the wreck of the blacks. The poem relates the story of the wreck where a black father and his son were living for five decades “sick and neglected” (68). After the death of the father, the son’s siblings quickly sell the house leaving the sick son wandering in the streets “drunk and displaced” (68). “our beautiful/White neighbor . . . found that wasp nest/While remodeling this wreck” (68). The poet says the father’s ghost has now taken the form of “ten thousand wasps” (69). He explicitly moralizes, “That’s the lesson of this poem:/Grief is as dangerous and unpredictable /As a twenty-pound nest of wasps/ Or this: Houses are haunted/Not by the dead. So let us pray/For the living. Let us pray/For the wasps and sons who haunt us” (69). The transformation of the father to thousands of wasps has roots in the Native American worldview that death is not the end of man.

“Independence Day” is a critical note on having the power to deny others their due rights and respect. Like many other poems by Alexie, this poem carries its theme through a commonplace incident which happens to the speaker in the street. While approaching his parked car he sees an angry man waiting for him to fight for his parking space usurped by the speaker. The man finds the speaker strong and powerful and changes his tone to a softer one. Reveled in his sudden meekness, the speaker projects his anger at the man, “I would kill this stranger/ And eat his lungs, stomach, heart, thumbs, and eyes./ I became the one in love with danger” (132). An enraged man deprives others of their due rights depending on his strength, “it was shitty/ I took the man’s space and dignity” (133). The father of his two sons witnessing the events, he realizes, “But I failed to
give them this lesson:/ Sons, what I did to that man was wrong;/ There
can be that much weakness in being strong” (133).

“Ten Thousand Fathers” deals with fathers, sons, and their
inevitable interrelationship. The speaker sees all fathers connected
together, “Please, children, demand to see/The list of fathers who faded, fell out,/ And died in the same bed where your father/Faded and fell” (143). The disconnection from fathers is impossible, “can we /Ever divorce, separate, leave, run out/ Abandon, or exorcise? As water/Always returns to water, so all dead fathers return to their children” (143).

“How to Create an Agnostic” is Alexie’s comment on the foolish
and childish way people glorify somebody and turn him into a holy saint. He relates how his son so innocently thinks that his father is of such a
great power that can create lightning while the whole incident has been a
case of mere chance or coincidence. Having false belief in his father’s ability, the child wants the father to set the giant tree out of the window on fire, and the father admits, “I can’t do that because your father, /Your half-assed messiah, is afraid of fire” (101). This poem casts a cynical light on the sole reliance of sons on fathers. Taking the father figure as traditions, one can take this poem as Alexie’s resentments against nativism. “Song Son Blue” stands as Alexie’s comments on his people’s artificial nativism. The poem is annotated and each footnote is itself explained in a couplet, sometimes a comment on the annotated word, sometimes an explanation on that, or a contradictory note. Being an Indian recognized by his long hair, the speaker has his hair cut short and is censured by his people for having resembled the whites. His fans criticize him because he looks “so corporate”; in the footnote that
accompanies this he quotes, “But, Sherman, with short hair you look kinda white, /And nothing like the rez boy some of us knew” (65). The speaker criticizes his fans for their “casual racism”. He explains that because of his father’s death he cut his hair short for the “sacred despair” he had. The speaker goes on calling his criticizing fans as “you fuckers” which is annotated by the couplet, “In my garden, the cannibal plants thrive/By eating the other blooms, stems, leaves, and roots” (65). Implicitly he calls his fans as cannibals; here Alexie is using Western stereotype of cannibal for his own people. He accuses them for not seeing the truth in his act of cutting his hair short out of sacred despair, “I’m grieving, you fuckers, so now when you stare,/ You’ll see the vengeful son returning the glare” (65). Annotating “the vengeful son” the poet writes in a couplet, “I want to be the Hamlet that doesn’t whine, / But stands and tells himself ‘To do or not to do’” (65). Such a comparison between himself and Hamlet stands as the poet’s parody of the colonial tragic hero who is despisingly viewed by the postcolonial poet as one who whines; changing Hamlet’s main concern from “To be or not to be” to “To do or not to do” shows the disparity that rifts the Indian worldview from the Western outlook. The Natives are not tormented in the mind by hesitation as the philosophizing hero is, rather they are men of action. Unlike the Western hero whose mind is tortured by his doubts on life and being itself, the Indians, well assured of life, are concerned with when and how to act.

“A-Gatewards” contrasts the way people in the past hosted their guests when not all the roads were mapped with the present time when not a single space has been left unmapped. In the past the hosts
accompanied their guests through the unmapped woods and swamps till they reach a safe place then they would say them good night. “In our days, the wilderness /Is less than wild, and thoroughly mapped” (111), so it seems silly to accompany the guests to the nearby highway. The speaker suffices to give them a Google map which ironically confuses them more; that is why he excuses himself as being a “paranoid” host. Asking his guests to give him a phone when they get home safely, he states, “You know I’m singing you this love poem/Grateful that you did find the known road” (112). Technology is not a help these days; rather it makes man more puzzled.

“The Sum of His Parts” is Alexie’s comment on technology which has mediated man and nature and has thus proved to be quite destructive to nature. The speaker runs over a snake on the road by his car taking it as a telephone cord, “I realized it was a snake/ Only after I’d run over it” (51). Feeling guilty, he brings the car to a halt and says a prayer to the Snake God (51) wondering if such a god did exist. Since the snake has been torn into three pieces, he drags the tail off the road to the west, and the head off the road to the east and leaves the middle part on the road, “Because it was flattened and gory” (52). He does this as he does not want the snake’s body to be insulted by other cars. Two miles up the road, he returns to the snake and drags the tail and the middle part across the road lays them beside the head, doubting, “If the snake’s three pieces arrived/ separately in heaven/ Would any of them be able to find the others?” (52). Such a sense of respect for the smashed snake has roots only in Native worldview with its equal concern for all creatures in the universe. The speaker’s doubts on the Snake God or Snake Heaven have
no voice in Christianity which centers mostly on humans and attends to other beings only in the margins, taking man as the lord of all creatures. In contrast, the Indians do not believe in man’s superior position hence his ideas on a god and a heaven specific to snakes. The ending line of the poem utilizes the mathematical discourse, “snake + snake + snake = snake” (52). This mathematical gesture cherishes its own precision and logic which most obviously does way with his theological doubts on the existence of the Snake God or Snake Heaven, affirming them both. Besides, this poem could also be politicized in another way. The West has had a ravaging history of looting and taking apart Indians all over Americas without caring for their beliefs and paying due respect even to their dead. While the speaker unknowingly smashes the snake and cares for its fate in Snake Heaven, the West does not respect either the Indians’ dead or the alive. The disrupted unity of the Natives both in this life and the afterlife is what the West has never thought of and would not.

In “Size Matters”, Alexie gives different viewpoints on the significance of size in different contexts each of which is marked by a specific place and date. The poem looks like a diary. In the first part subtitled “San Francisco, 1993 & 2003”, he talks of an interview session held at a waterfront dive. He and the journalist are eating lunch together when birds sit and take bites from his sandwich. When a Down Syndrome woman sits by him and hugs him, she says, “Oh, Lila loves the big guys” (116). He finds no reference to the incident in the journalist’s report. When they have another interview in the same place after ten years, he refers back to that day when he charmed the birds, but the journalist cannot remember it; he complains, “She didn’t remember it. And, damn,
it hurt/ To be a big man and yet be so easily erased” (116).

The demands of the technology-ridden society run encounter to the age-old traditions of the tribe. In “Chicken” Alexie takes issue with traditional practices which display only the irrationality of the tribal people. The father refuses to join his wife who is taking their two children to see the powwow dance “with transparent eyes” giving them “an aboriginal chance” (83). Staying home, he says “They wouldn’t hear my crazy rants/About the powwow bullies who made me cry” (83). Upon returning, the wife tells him how the two sons found joy in their uncles and pride in their grandmother’s eyes.

In “Bird-Organ”, the speaker is a poet who believes “that art is colonial,/And the best art is imperialistic” (98). He confesses that this theory shows him a traitor to his tribal people. Violating the norms of his tradition, he refuses to write on “sacred ceremonies,/ And I rarely speak the names of the dead – /Though I’m going to violate those taboos” (99). Then he goes on telling of a white archeologist’s who has recorded his grandmother’s voice in a tribal ceremony. He does not bother if the voice is original or duplicate; counterarguing nativism and traditionalism, he contends, “It’s wrong,/ I suppose, to worship the duplicate” while he is aware “‘ . . . it’s decades too late/ To save the original’” (99). He worships the grandmother’s voice as he does the Flaming Lips, since he is against nostalgia.

Displacement and its sordid aftermaths for the Indians is the other subject matter to which Alexie turns his hands. His critical and at times cynical treatment of this issue shows his anger at colonization.
“Inappropriate” best portrays in its constantly shifting form between prose and poetry the plight of indigenous people who having been displaced from their culture are now strangers into their own traditions. The speaker is a lecturer who has some homoerotic dreams of Scott Fitzgerald, the writer of The Great Gatsby. In a humorous tone, he describes how he has been visited in his hotel room by the novelist’s ghost. In the second prose part he addresses himself to the readers and tell them, “After I woke from my dream about Gatsby’s ghost, I sat at my hotel room desk, and I wrote most of the poem you are now reading” (27). Addressing the gathered professors of American literature, he tells of his own plight as an Indian writer: “Fitzgerald had given me the vocabulary to describe my own Native American identity. Oh, yes, I am the genocided Indian who is also the dream-filled refugee! Oh, yes, I am indigenous to the land but an immigrant into the culture! I am the ironic indigenous immigrant!” (27). It is such a plight that has not been regarded by Bhabha when he celebrated the notion of Third Space and its merits as hybridity and ambivalence. When Alexie writes, “I realized that Indians are now and will always be walking backwards” (28), he is actually referring to the bad effects of their nativism. He talks of this in a humorous tone, “in my mind’s HDTV, I saw two million Indians walking together, with their big faces pointed toward the past and their flat asses pointed toward the future, and I laughed. It was sadly humorous! Or humorously sad!” (28). Reflecting on the nature of humor, Alexie brings some quotations like Victor Borge’s saying, “‘Humor is something that thrives between man’s aspirations and his limitations’”; or Mel Brooks’s, “‘Humor is just another defense against the universe’” (28). In the face
of such quotations, the way the speaker is received in a comment is quite revealing. The comment card “fatally declared that ‘All Sherman was, was funny’” (28). The rest of the poem goes on expressing the speaker’s anger at the degrading tone sensed in the comment: “Well, that comma between the ‘was’ and ‘was’ was comedy./ But it also conveyed an insult that I can’t ignore./ It implied that I’m mediocre – that I’m a laugh whore” (28). The bitter fact that his points in his humor have not been picked up by his colleagues disturbs him and at the same time reveals the gap which has always gaped between the Natives and the Westerners; it is the difference in their worldviews that is present in his serious jokes and is missed by his colleagues. But he is not going to abide by their professorial conventions (28).

The poem “Scarlet” is a comment on cultural estrangement that Indians have been exposed to and have thus become enigmatic. The poem bears an allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, the heroine of which has been marked by a scarlet A for her adulterous affair with a priest. In this poem, Alexie sees a woman whose face has turned scarlet for the “morbid case of acne” (63) that it bears. The speaker wonders why the woman does not cure her face with new dermatologic achievements. He concludes, “her poverty/Has brutally tattooed her” (64). Comparing her to Hester Prine for the Scarlet A, he regrets the comparison, as “She might be an everyday sort of brave,/ Someone with no wish or need to be saved” (64). When he pauses at the door to see her once more he sees how she attacks her skin by fingernail. What he sees in her is self-hatred which he symbolizes it to the Indians who have got estranged to their traditions, “Estranged from the tribe that offers protection, /What happens to the soul that hates its reflection?” (64).
In *Old Shirts and White Skins*, Alexie addresses colonialism in the same critical tone. “Economics of the Tribe” gives a view of the tribal life after colonization. The poet gives bare definitions of some economic terms all of which have been imposed on the Indians. The morbid symptoms of such definitions are the financial dependence of the Indians on the colonists, wasting away their money on drinks, pleasure, or gambling. “bond” is no more human bond with others, but rather it “means you’re in jail,/ only interest you can get/is an interest in getting out” (8). Finance for them is only money, “money all over the place/money/ tucked in our wallets and shoes” (8). The only risk they can have is the risk in gambling, the money of which is also to be spent “passing out at powwow” (8).

“Learning to Drown” (*Old Shirts*) is a tragic comment on the way the whites lead the non-whites toward destruction. The poem consists of five parts. The first part is on the tragic story the speaker hears on the radio while driving about a country where the captors having no rooms for 600 jailed men, lead them to a nearby river and drown all of them before the eyes of other prisoners. The second part is the identification of the speaker with one of those getting drowned, “I can still see my reflection/in water, my face/ flooding the banks, a body/of water erasing boundaries,/ changing the distance between past and present” (12-13). The third part is on a reservation Down Syndrome girl whose feet tangles in weed and falls into the river fighting for a breath. The fourth part is on his mother thinking that his skull gets bigger and swelling while the doctors take this as “a mother’s imagination growing” (13). The mother tells him of her nightmare, “you were pressed against walls/ of our house,
breaking through,/ that it would never stop” (13). The last part is on his childhood memories when he used to watch how his brother and some friends “dared each other to swim/all the way across the river/ to the opposite shore” (14).

In the same collection, “Indian Education” is on the way technology has disintegrated Indians when displaced. The poem revolves around “Crazy Horse” which stands for the stereotyped Indian figure. The poem starts with Crazy Horse being revived in a storage room of the Smithsonian. Wandering in the halls, he was found by a security guard and left in a room where he watched television. Crazy Horse watched all a basketball game, and a scientific documentary on the physical differences between Indians and settlers. In the documentary film, the scientist has measured both and found the Indians are taller than the settlers, “and in some areas, the difference/ in height exceeded a foot, which proved nothing” (19). The way the documentary interprets the results as proving nothing shows the racism that underlie the so-called objective documentary. Crazy Horse measured himself “against the fact of a mirror /. . . memorized the city/folding, unfolding, his mapped heart” (19). The fact that his heart is mapped shows that Crazy Horse is just an image made by the settlers through whom they are educating the Indians based on their own criteria, hence a stereotype.

“Archeology” from Old Shirts is on the archeological search of the speaker on the banks of a river for the lost tribes, “the long forgotten/ burial ground of some tribe” (20). Deep down the river bed, he sees his own reflection, “a shovel-shaped incisor/ is all I need / to prove mouth/ and face” (20). What he perceives down the river is his own image which has long been forgotten and buried under heaps of colonial legacy.
“Sociology” (*Old Shirts*) symbolizes how the Indian society has been deprived by the settlers. The short poem is on how the speaker falls in love with the Indian lady with her six kids; he takes them home, “where my minimum wage/raised the household income/and lowered our benefits” (25). As soon as the man fails to provide commodities, she tells him to leave (25). This shows how the settlers have rendered the Indians dependent upon them for the mere survival.

Alexie’s expression of anger is revenge which is treated ambivalently by the poet in both his collections. In *Face*, “Seattle, Washington, 2005” starts on his being sneered at by his son’s friend for his big belly. This remark in the presence of the three beautiful mothers of his friends provokes his revenge and then he starts describing each one as wrecks in their private lives. But immediately gets aware of what he is doing and retreats “So I silently apologized for my cruelty” (117). Reflecting on revenge, he states, “Revenge seems to be as basic as food, shelter, and sex” (177). Quoting Confucius, “Before you embark on a journey /Of revenge, dig two graves”, the speaker finds his life being spent in the dirt: “I own a well-worn shovel. My hands are big and bloody,/ And I have used them to dig graves and write poems - to hurt and to be hurt” (117). Thus he puts under question all literature which has been proved by men of colors as acts of revenge upon the colonizers.

“When Asked What I Think about Indian Reservations, I Remember a Deer Story” (*Face*) is another poem from the same collection which is Alexie’s comment on the reservations. The poem best represents the poet’s reservations against nativism and worshipping the past. Addressing children as the next generation, the speaker asks them to
imagine a deer whose legs and spine are being crushed beneath the wheels of a logging truck. Then he identifies the deer with their “failed fathers” who are “still drunk and broke” in heaven. Thus he admonishes the children to escape their “bloody past”, calling the dead father as “a dangerous man” (p. ?). He scares children for becoming “that deer, torn in half” (p?). What failed fathers need is their grief, not their prayers: “Grief is you dad’s food, heat, water, and air./ And he will feats for years and never quit./ And will demand more grief, but never prayers” (p?). The speaker thinks the father is like the wheels of a logging truck, crushing the deer’s bone sunder its pressure. He wants children to get rid of the pressure thus advises them to “Scream and bleed your way along the road,/ Until your lungs, heart, and veins are empty/ Of grief, and deny your father’s ghost/His last chance to be your warrior-thief” (131). In such grief what is hidden is the urge to revenge and revenge is destructive for both the living and the dead.

The plights of the displaced Indians on the reservations find expression in his Old Skins and White Shirts. In “Architecture”, Alexie depicts in a critical way the colonial encounter in the reservations. The encounter has given the Natives bare rooms without doors or windows as houses; in fact they more resemble prison cells. In this jail, they are imposed the colonial definitions. While previously the Indians had direct access to natural landscape, now they can “map across landscape /of our body” (7). In this jail, the only weapon they have is their hands “pressed/tightly against its heartbeat, breaking us/ down into everything we want to own” (7). Here the issue of ownership which is Western is raised for the Indians who have been stripped of all their properties in the
reservations. In fact, ownership here does not mean that separatist, selfish proprietorship; rather it signifies their return to what they previously used to cherish but now they have been deprived of. In “Aria”, Alexie ironically criticizes the colonists for imposing on the Indians the Buffalo Bill leading to the drastic loss of buffalo. In an Indian tradition of thanksgiving, the speaker gives thanks to the whips, the chains, and the shipment of his fathers from Africa. (44).

In “Citizen Kane” from the same volume of poetry, Alexie mingles the tribal discourse with the movie discourse bringing in the name of an American movie, *Rosebud*. When the speaker talks of changing or not changing the world, he comments, “It doesn’t matter which/ as long as our failures are spectacular” (51). Big Mom is dying of cancer crying out *Frybread*; Lester is drunk whispering *Snakes*; and Junior “sold his blood for the 100th time and asked *Forgiveness* (51). The speaker wants his listeners to believe that “nothing is forgotten for history” while history ignores such minor private histories. When the sun sets in the reservation, “each of us choose the word/that determines our dreams:/whiskey salmon absence” (51). The three ending words signify the displacement, acculturation, and their sordid aftermaths in the lives of the Natives. In their traditions, dreams are highly respected as doors to spiritual dimension of man. But now under the rule of the colonizers, their dreams are as empty and insignificant as “whiskey, salmon, and absence”.

Such spiritual devastation is in line with harsh deprivations of their most honored property, their horses. In *Old Shirts*, Alexie attends to this issue. Like Harjo and Allen, Alexie concerns himself with the significant role horses play in the Native world. “Horses” is a tragic note on the
significance of horses for the Indians and how the settlers have shot them. The speaker repeats some sentences with slight variations. The repeated sentences look like a herd of horses in which every horse looks a replica of others. The first stanza is on the large number of horses having been shot by the United States Cavalry. The same amount has been stolen and the same number has survived. In the second part he tells how an Indian cowboy, a hybrid of Indian and Western culture, rode a horse over a fence and how the horse threw him. The speaker also tells of his cousin having slashed the horse that refuses to climb down the mountain. Then he hears the sound of gunshots. Hearing the news on the radio, he decides to steal the horses back to their tribes (29). The last part is on the significance horse has for the Indians. In fact it is one of the bases of their identities. Repeatedly he says he owns no horses, hence his lack of identity is emphasized (30).

Like Allen and Harjo, Alexie attempts to find solutions for the Natives’ predicaments under the colonial reign. His approach resembles Harjo’s who chooses to cast back the colonizer’s strategies against himself instead of voting for separatism. In his *Face* collection, he attends to this point in the poem, “Heroes”. In “Heroes” the speaker tells of his father who had fought in World War II as a pilot and upon his death he asked his son to scatter his remains by plane over the farm of their neighbor who is their “mortal enemy” (78). The son does so, “And exploded my father all over the farm./ His ashes drifted onto the house and plows, / and settled nicely around three dairy cows.” (78). The mixture of the Indian man’s remains with the farm and cows of the enemy symbolize Bhabha’s notion of hybridity which has a powerful resisting
force. Hence the son states, “Ah, I was grief-stoned and thrilled./ My father would live on in his enemy’s milk” (78).

Likewise, in “Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers”, another poem from the same volume, the poet relates in prose and poetry how he has learned from the white male and female writers to attack them in their own weapon. Yet he has acquired this ability at the cost of losing the trust of his own tribe. They no longer take him as one of their own, but as an enemy. This justifies a drunk black man who had in his childhood bullied him while drunk saying, “‘You ain’t no fucking better/ Than the rest of us Skins!’” (79). Now that he had become a renowned writer, the same man approaches him asking him in a drunken state to buy his eagle feathers. He buys the feathers not out of mercy but out of pity (79). In the prose part he defines “sovereignty” in Indian culture which means “the collective and tribal desire for political, cultural, and economic independence” (79). But he uses the same word against Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s claim “That Skins shouldn’t write autobiography./ She believes that ‘tribal sovereignty’/Should be our ethos” (80). The speaker complains that his tribe tried to murder him and what has rescued him has been “all those goddamn texts/ By all those damn white male and female writers /That first taught me how to be a fighter” (80). The speaker does not vote for nativism which separates cultures; rather he sees salvation in cultural hybridity. Thus in the prose part, he rejects Cook-Lynn, saying, “let me slap Cook-Lynn upside he head with the right hand of John Keats and the left hand of Emily Dickinson. Let me kick her in the shines with the left toe of Marianne Moore and the right toe of John Donne. I wasn’t saved by the separation of cultures; I was reborn inside the collision of
cultures” (80). This is Bhabha’s resisting thesis against the racism of the colonial and the separatism of the natives. The speaker himself is a hybrid figure, an indigenous who has thrived on the colonial commodity, slightly criticized by Grant when she finds her clothes do not fit him, saying, “Looks like you’ve had a little too much commodity cheese” (81). The poet speaker then goes on to praise Dorothy Grant, a clothes designer, for her hybridizing “traditional Haida symbol and imagery with twenty-first century fashion” (80). Grant rides a “hybrid car” (81) and makes hand-sewn clothes formally constructed (81). He likes her hybridity so much that he tends to write for her “A hybrid sonnet sequence. . . . An indigenous celebration of colonialism or maybe a colonial celebration of the indigenous” (81). The poem ends with his hybrid sonnet in which he talks of his colonial sonnet form which abides by the rules of sonnet but puts on fluid the colonial culture which he is mimicking. In his sonnet, “colonialism’s influence/Is fluid and solid, measurable/And mad. I find it pleasurable/ To (imperfectly) mimic white masters” (82). Contra responsive to separatists like Cook-Lynn, the poet speaker embraces all cultures, “I claim all of it; Hunger is my crime” (82).

Besides all these political issues, Alexie’s poetry is marked with his stylistic experimentalism. His stylistic interplays render him more than a mere poet of resistance. He is now referred to as a postmodern poet. Like Harjo, he mixes prose and poetry; while Harjo attempts to procure kind of balance in style along with her thematic concerns, Alexie does not care about balance and, more than that, does away with its hints in his poetry. Discarding balance and intermingling different genres and
discourses in his poetry are his specific resisting strategies as a poet-writer to accord ambivalence to his literary career. As an instance, one can refer to “War Stories” which is Aelxie’s play on a narrative poem. The main poem is a narrative of his uncle having punched out a man’s eye in a fight. First he says the uncle is long dead; but in a footnote, numbered on the word “uncle”, another poem piece appears in which he confesses having lied about the identity of the one who had half blinded the man; it was not his uncle but his cousin who is still alive. The one-eyed man acknowledges that he owes his insight to the loss his uncle gave him: “Before your uncle’s punch, I was closed and cruel./But now I see more with one eye than two/I had to lose some sense to get some sense” (18). Then the speaker takes the gesture of a literary critic and discusses the significance of the incident: “If the audience / Is willing to suspend their disbelief – /If they trust what a half-blind man can see – /Then they’ll discover the beauty of grief” (18). In the sub-narrative poem about his cousin he also concerns himself with grief but from another angle; he says for Indians grief is of significance in so far as they pay more attention to grief, death, and their dead and afterlife than to their present life. He states, “if you open our dictionary, /You’ll find ‘indigenous’ right below ‘grief’” (19). Equating “indigenous” with “grief” is the poet’s irony-based attempt to target the sufferings inflicted on the Indians all through a long history of subordination. In the footnotes to the poem, the poet gives the mood of the poem a humorous tone by narrating how Navajos of the North brag about their tribes (20).

“Missed Connections”, from the collection Face, is an experiment and experience on how the mistakes can turn one simple ordinary story to
an epic, even a myth. While getting off the plane, the speaker sees a woman reveling in joy upon seeing her husband and shouting, “‘That’s my husband’. . . I haven’t seen/Him in ten years” (135). The speaker’s curiosity takes him into his imagination to improvise the story of the woman who has been away from her husband for a decade. When he fabricates the story and at the same time is himself impressed by the myth he had made, a woman beside him tells him he had misheard the word “years”, as she has been away from him only for ten days. The speaker feels frustrated, “I thought I had witnessed an epic/. . ./But it was something more simplistic./It was a love story, small and silly” (136). What this poem implies is the constructedness of literary works. The narrator’s wild imagination takes him, upon his mistake, to the world of epics and romances; and his frustration at knowing the fact reflects his imaginative powers getting debilitated by realities. Postcolonially speaking, one can take this poem as his comments on colonial epic and romance works, rendering them all as works of missed connections. Simultaneously, however, the enchanting realm of imagination is favored over the dull simplistic world of the real. This gives Alexie the dual stance of one who both censures and praises; who likes and dislikes; hates and loves.

The same theme of dualism gains politico-psychological expression in the poem after which the collection has been named, “Face”. “Face” is on a basketball player named James Bailey; Alexie himself calls it “an honor song” (46). While Bailey has become an epic, being “canonized by the adoring crowd” (47), the speaker finds himself mean. Overtaken and embarrassed by the grandeur of Bailey’s house, he does not have the face to enter his house; this feeling deepens his insight,
giving him a big picture, “When we hoopsters look into our interior, / We learn we can be gorgeous and yet inferior” (47). Despite being a star in their lives, they always feel inferior on a land where they have been subordinated and looked down upon as inferior “other”. The title of the poem can refer to two persons, James Bailey who has a good public face and simultaneously is inferiorized for his skin; and the speaker who loses his face, courage, to see the real, inferior, place of a gorgeous sport star.

“The Gathering Sun” from the same collection is another poem which shows Alexie’s experimentalism. The poet starts his poem by a line from Theodore Roethke, “All day and all night the wind roared in the trees” (66). In the second stanza he contradicts himself saying, “No, I lied. There was no wind and no trees, /No storm, no thunder, no lightning, no knives” (66); he justifies his lying, “Awake, insomniac, enraged, I lied” (66). Then he shifts to his friend who has been shot by two children and who his brother, Arnold, was going to bury. The brother has buried many. When the speaker tells, “He buried Lightning, he buried Thunder/ And he dug their graves with his thin blue knives,” (66), he is actually identifying Arnold with death. Then the speaker turns to death contradicting what he said in the previous stanzas, “While my brother mourns, I lie about death./ Death is not a wind roaring in the trees./ . /Death won’t slash children with its thin blue knife.” (67). The last stanza shows an identification between the speaker, the mourning brother, and death: “All day and all night my lies roar in trees./I thunder and wake my sons and my wife./ She holds the older, she soothes the baby./ And I’m blue lightning flashing his thin blue knives” (67). The beginning line of the last stanza is a rewriting of the beginning line of the first stanza, the line taken from Roethke. Such a rewriting is a parody of the colonial
line. Substituting “wind” with “lies” is a postcolonial attempt to criticize the unreliable policies of the colonial. Furthermore, Roethke’s line is in the past, yet Alexie’s is in simple present tense which emphasizes not only the repetitiveness of the verb “roar” but it also gives it a normalcy which is particular to this verb tense.

The last but not the least important point about Alexie’s poetry is his own definition of poetry which underlies all his poetic career. In his collection, *Face*, he refers to this issue in two poems. In “The Oral Tradition”, the speaker equals reading to having sex. The poet speaker argues, “I turn each reading into a test/ Of my humor and masculinity/. . .but I want strangers to want me/ Naked on their shelves if not in their beds” (89). “Who doesn’t know poetry is just like sex?” (91). “Nudity Clause” is a poem about the speaker’s sexual arousal when he sees his favorite actress completely naked in a movie. Contemplating on her nudity, first he rejects her act of appearing as naked as born, but then he realizes her nudity “was necessary and natural/ For her part in this period film. Of course./ She was naked. Why shouldn’t she be?” (93). When asked by his wife what kind of movie he has watched that had given him such arousal, he replies, “Honey, it was a farce about colonial discovery” (93). Mixing the discourse of sex with that of colonialism, Alexie hints at the way the master, masculine colonizer forces an exploitative relation on the stereotypically female colonized. His discovery of the necessity of her friend’s nudity for that scene is a farce of colonial discovery; it is a farce as it lacks the colonial oppression and molestation of the sexually and racially “other”. His realization is instead an affirmation of her role on the scene which gives her greatness, unlike the colonial encounter which subordinates the other.
Conclusion

This chapter has been a detailed analysis of the selected poems of Sherman Alexie. As the analysis shows Alexie shares some common points with Allen and Harjo and concurrently his poetry reflect his divergences from the other two poets’ attitudes. Like them he nourishes feminist concerns and cares about the disturbed bonds between man and nature. While Allen and Harjo try to restore the female voice to nature and pose it at the core, Alexie approaches nature from the eyes of a male thinker, usually a father figure or a son. Like the other two poets, Alexie politicizes his treatment of nature and natural elements which are essential to their Native worldviews, but unlike them he reprojects on man-nature relations his own experience as a mixed-blood Indian caught up in the hybrid colonial encounter. Alexie’s poetry is the domain in which he maneuvers his experimentalism and through which he reflects on the harsh realities of his and his people’s lives. He touches on alcoholism, poverty, technology, and religion as the main sources of Indian’s sufferings. But unlike Allen and Harjo, Alexie does not go for traditions as he avoids the pitfalls of traditionalism and nativism. He does not approve of some traditions which put under question the tribe’s logic and compassion. Thus with respect to the question of traditions, he takes a less biased stance as compared to Allen and Harjo. It is this flexibility that permits him to experiment on different discourses and genres without bothering himself about balance, unity, coherence, or continuity. One could claim that Alexie’s poetry stands for what the poetic canvass of Native American literature lacks and this signifies the essential role that his poetry plays in the whole picture.