

## Unhomed at Home: A Postcolonial Reading of Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine"

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### ABSTRACT

*"The Search Engine" is a short story by Native American writer Sherman Alexie. The story depicts a quest undertaken by a young urban Indigenous woman to find an enigmatic Indian poet and, by extension, her own postcolonial self. This article proposes to read Alexie's "The Search Engine" through the lens of postcolonial criticism to investigate the text's anticolonialist ideology and approaches to resist the colonialist domination and deal with the postcolonial condition. The analysis reveals that the text presents an anticolonialist sentiments through marginal characters who are conditioned by the sense of unhomeliness as a result of their socioeconomic disadvantages. The text then subverts the colonialist ideology by secularising Christian terminologies and revisiting a literary canon from the point of view of the underclass. Finally, the text suggests that conflicting postcolonial identities can be reconciled and hybridised through respect and recognition at an individual level.*

*Keywords: The Search Engine; Sherman Alexie; Native American; Postcolonialism; Colonialist Ideology*

### INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORKS

#### NATIVE AMERICANS AND NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURES

According to traditional historicism, Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas in the late fifteenth century, gave the name "Indians" to the Indigenous Tainos on the island of Guanahani in the Bahamas (Townsend, 2019, p. 33) and inaugurated the colonisation of the New World. His achievements won him distinctions, titles and profits during his lifetime and many more recognitions afterwards – places named Colombo, Columbia and Columbus are some of the most obvious examples. Over time, however, common sense bred new, common knowledge, and school children today take for granted that the "Indians" discovered by Columbus were not Indian – as in 'of India' – despite the usage of the word as a generic term for all of America's native populations and that the New World was in fact territories as old as any ancient European patch of civilisation (Porter & Roemer, 2005, p. 41; Townsend, 2019, p. 5).

Politicians had a harder time catching up with such progress. In the U.S., Native Americans were collectively perceived as the "Indian problem" and suppressed physically and psychologically by white settlers who imposed legislation and policies in attempts to take over their lands (e.g. the 1830 Indian Removal Act and the 1887 General Allotment Act) and eradicate their cultural heritage (e.g. The 1868 Peace Policy, aiming to 'civilise' and Christianise Native Americans confined in Indian reservations, and the 1953 Home Concurrent Resolution 108, aiming to terminate their tribes) (Adámková, 2011, pp. 30-32). It was not until 1975 that the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act was passed and Native Americans were allowed some control over their own affairs. By then, it was acknowledged that the concept of reservations was a failure and irreparable damage had been done to the general population of American Indians. Stripped of their tribal languages, religions and roots and imperfectly assimilated into a new culture whose motto was "Kill the Indian, Save the

Man” (Westron, 2010), they had lost their voices, spiritual connection and sense of belonging. The poor conditions of the reservations and constant abuses from the authorities had turned tribes of independent nomads and warriors – the romanticised stereotype of olden-day Native Americans – into bands of drunks and losers who were chronically dependent on government welfare – the denigrating stereotype of present-day Native Americans (Adámková, 2011, pp. 27-33).

The earliest literature in English about Native Americans were written by white colonialists and leaned heavily on binary, stereotypical savage/noble-savage portrayals. Native Americans themselves traditionally preserved their culture orally through creation stories, dream songs and chants in their native languages (Vizenor, 1995, pp. 6-7). The dawn of Native American literatures in English came in the nineteenth century when personal accounts on tribal traditions and culture, reservation experiences and the forced conversion to Christianity were recorded by Native Americans who had been educated in the English-language schools in their reservations. Publications of their works, nevertheless, were scarce (Owens, 1994, p. 24). Then came the 1960s when political movements in favor of revisionist history and ethnic minorities encouraged the flowering of Native American fiction, which came to be termed “Native American Renaissance” and was headed by Pulitzer Prize-winning author N. Scott Momaday and his contemporaries such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, Vine Deloria Jr. and Simon Ortiz. Their writings combined both Indigenous and western traditions to depict the loss of traditional life and modern-day struggles with poverty, unemployment and alcoholism as well as to criticise and come to terms with both the mainstream society and themselves (VanSpankeren, n.d., p. 116; Dennis, 2007, p. 1; Adámková, 2011: pp. 28-29; Roberts, 2018, p. 11).

In the late twentieth century, the visibility of Native American literatures grew dramatically thanks to the “diverse, exciting and flourishing” (Dennis, 2007, p. 1) works of many notable authors such as Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, Janet Campbell Hale, Louis Owens, Betty Louise Bell, Gloria Bird, LeAnne Howe, Allison Adele Hedge Coke, Michael Dorris, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Greg Sarris, Susan Power, Diane Glancy, Frances Washburn and Sherman Alexie. The literary recognition and commercial success have inspired scholarly interest, and Native American literatures have since been anthologised, translated and entered into various academic syllabi (Porter & Roemer, 2005, pp. 1-4; Roberts, 2018, p. 11). These fiction and nonfiction writings illustrate the complexities of “dynamic Indigenous truths” (Roberts, 2018, p. 11) that surround Native American cultures and identities and stimulate academic studies on issues such as gender and sexuality, boundary transgression and transnational frameworks related to Indigenous languages and culturally informed perspectives (Roberts, 2018, pp. 11-12). Although some scholars see this attention as the recognition of Native American literatures by “mainstream” institutions (Porter & Roemer, 2005, p. 3), this view is contested by others such as Dennis (2007, pp. 1-2) who argues that in spite of the growth in this ‘new’ field, very few Native American writings have been accepted as part of the broader American literary canon. ‘Reading’ Native American literatures within these institutional corpuses, it seems, is an allegory of being urban Native Americans in the twenty-first century – being unhomed at home. This study aims to investigate such a predicament as faced by various characters in Sherman Alexie’s “The Search Engine” and explore the ways in which these characters negotiate clashing ideologies that have become a common aspect of the modern life.

SHERMAN ALEXIE'S "THE SEARCH ENGINE"

Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur D'Alene writer and poet from the second generation of the Native American Renaissance – those born in the 1960s and 70s (Adámková, 2011: p. 26). He has garnered many distinguished book awards (Kuiper, n.d.; National Book Foundation, n.d.; Poetry Foundation, 2010) and has been hailed as “the youngest Native-American novelist to achieve national fame” (VanSpanckeren, n.d., p. 152).

“The Search Engine” is the first story in Alexie’s 2003 short story collection *Ten Little Indians*, which presents nine contemporary tales of Native Americans whose different walks of urban life seem to be shadowed by the common themes of ambivalent identity and cultural authenticity. It is the first collection to be written after September 11, 2001, and Alexie has discussed in interviews how the terrorist attacks on American soil on that day changed the focus of his work from “an antagonistic ‘them and us’ tribalism” to “a broader, more universal view of the human condition” (Westron, 2010), as recaptured in the following review:

While his protagonists are still almost exclusively Indian, their personal traumas are not defined by, nor the result of their ethnicity. They are human beings first, and Indian by accident of birth. It is this breaking down of old tribal affiliations – affiliations that encourage an unwavering sense of righteousness – that sets this collection apart from Alexie’s previous books. (Westron, 2010)

Arguably the strongest story in the collection, “The Search Engine” tells a story of Corliss Joseph, an English literature-major college sophomore and Spokane Indian with a passion for both poetry and a “maximum life” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5) beyond the reservation; the former is a constant source of shame at home where poetry is sneered at as “those white books” (Alexie, 2003, p. 13), while the latter is an embarrassing source of cheer at the reservation where her father proudly declares: “After Corliss graduates from college and gets her law degree, she’s going to move back to the reservation and fix what’s wrong. ... I’ll tell you what. My daughter is going to save our tribe” (Alexie, 2003, p. 16). When Corliss comes across a book of poetry by an unknown poet named Harlan Atwater who claims to be a Spokane Indian and writes about reservation experience in his poems, she starts to search for him – a task not easily accomplished since his name is neither registered in the Spokane Tribal Enrollment nor recognised by any member of the close-knit tribe. She eventually manages to track him down, journeys to metropolitan Seattle and convinces him to meet with her. In a used-book store, Harlan Atwater tells her that he was adopted by a white couple and never grew up in the reservation. He could, however, imitate the Indian sentiments and experiences in his poems without difficulties by playing on the well-amplified stereotypes of Native Americans. Even though he wrote the poems out of the desire to return to his birthplace and his people, he found out that, in spite of the profuse camaraderie they professed in their intoxication, the Indians could not genuinely appreciate his poems, nor could he genuinely belong with them. He stopped writing poetry then and never looked back – not until Corliss came calling. When they part, Corliss puts Harlan’s book of poetry – the library copy that she has been carrying with her – on the shelf with the front cover facing outward along with the books by her favourite authors in the poetry section of the used-book store. Then she journeys home.

In form and content, “The Search Engine” accords very well with postcolonial literature. Previous studies on and related to “The Search Engine” can be clustered into two broad and occasionally overlapping categories: those with the thematic focus on identity, alienation and assimilation (Fletcher, 2006; Westron, 2010; Adámková, 2011; Korsmo, 2011; Farrington, 2013, 2015; Lafı, 2013; Kolb, 2014; Bańka, 2015; Rozzy, 2019), and those with the technical focus on literary and aesthetic devices and presentations (Adámková, 2011; Farrington, 2013, 2015; Murtaza & Bhatti, 2016; McCrink Burcham, 2018). Analytical tools used in the studies range from sociocultural/sociopolitical approaches (Fletcher, 2006; Farrington, 2013; Kolb, 2014; Rozzy, 2019) to deconstructive criticism (Murtaza & Bhatti,

2016), critical race theory (Lafi, 2013; Bańka 2015) and postmodernism (Adámková, 2011; McCrink Burcham, 2018). These critical frameworks are often applied to investigate particular angles and areas in postcolonial texts, and their applications are reasonable, even expected, as explained by Bressler (2011, pp. 206-207): “Like many schools of criticism, postcolonialism uses a variety of approaches to textual analysis. Deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, reader-oriented criticism, and cultural studies employ postcolonial theories in their critical methodologies.” Rather unexpectedly, however, although the term ‘postcolonial’ is mentioned frequently in many of these works which touch upon key areas of postcolonial sensitivity, the critical theory of postcolonialism has not yet been directly addressed and administered. The present study, therefore, aims to contribute to the existing body of academic works on Alexie’s writings by reading “The Search Engine” under the key terms and central concepts of the critical theory of postcolonialism.

#### POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Postcolonial concerns and concepts can be traced to the 1950s in anticolonial movements and intellectual inquiries after the Second World War. The terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postcolonialism’ themselves, however, did not appear in scholastic circles until the mid-1980s. By the mid-1990s, postcolonialism had become a major field in literary studies (Tyson, 2006, 418; Bressler, 2011, p. 201). In spite of the different available terms – ‘colonialism,’ ‘postcolonialism,’ and ‘neocolonialism’ – and their different definitions, theorists and scholars tend to focus more on the lack of distinctions between these words and use the term ‘postcolonial’ to refer to the experience of conquered people under the imperial hegemony, the culture affected by the imperial process and the ideology of the colonised peoples from the initial moment of colonisation to the present day (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989, p. 2; Bennett & Royle, 2004, p. 214; Bressler, 2011, p. 203 Tyson, 2011, p. 246).

In the broadest sense, ‘postcolonial literature,’ therefore, refers to literary works produced by the following groups of people: “members of colonised or formerly colonised populations,” “members of the colonising (white) culture in colonised or formerly colonised nations,” and members of “ethnic political minorities” whose experience of oppression by the dominant culture is common with the experience of formerly colonised populations (Tyson, 2011, pp. 246-247). Marchetti (1993, pp. 2-3) opines that the prejudiced representations of ethnic minorities contribute to the notion that “all nonwhite people are by nature licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilised, infantile and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.” Stylistically and thematically, postcolonial literature has transitioned from the ‘Adopt’ phase (unquestioning acceptance of Anglo-European models), to the ‘Adapt’ phase (intervention of native subject matters in the Anglo-European forms), and finally to the ‘Adept’ phase (independence from the Anglo-European norms) (Barry, 2009, p. 189). Under these terminologies, Sherman Alexie’s “The Search Engine” is considered a postcolonial literary work at the ‘Adept’ phase. It is this study’s aim to illustrate how this short story both depends on and deviates from the Anglo-European/American styles and stereotypes.

Although postcolonial studies concentrate on writings from colonised or formerly colonised cultures, the concepts of postcolonialism can be applied to analyse the works of any author to explore the ways in which multiple forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and classism can take over the experiences and consciousness of members of political minorities and to explore the means by which the oppression can be overcome (Bressler, 2011, pp. 199-200; Tyson, 2011, pp. 246-247). Dhouioui (2021) summarises the strategies characteristic of postcolonial writing as embracing “the unmasking of the hegemonic structures of power, the concern with dislocation and displacement, the reconstruction of history, universalising the

struggle, a belief in the power of the word to change the material conditions of people, the search for identity, albeit split, and the social and political function of art.”

As a theoretical framework for literature, therefore, postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the social, cultural, political and psychological operations of both colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies in literary texts and to interpret such texts as reinforcing or resisting the coloniser’s hegemony (Tyson, 2006, pp. 417-418; Bressler, 2011, p. 207). Given the slight variation of technical terms and details, postcolonial criticism comprises four characteristics (Barry, 2009, pp. 187-189): the awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or demonic ‘Other,’ the perception of writing in the coloniser’s language as a crucial acquiescence in colonial structures, the emphasis on double identity or hybridity as a result of the dynamic commingling of two cultures, and the stress on cross-cultural interactions. In his seminal works, *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha describes the feeling of abandonment experienced by the colonial subject who is caught between two antagonist cultures and calls it ‘unhomeliness.’ If the colonial subject internalises the oppressive ideology of the colonisers, he will harbour a sense of inferiority so strong that he desires to imitate the colonisers’ language, attire, customs and gestures. Bhabha calls this ‘mimicry.’ If he, however, embraces the dynamic of the blended cultures and finds the multiple, often ambivalent and conflicting, aspects of the interaction exciting and nourishing, he may find the process, which Bhabha calls ‘hybridity,’ productive and positive. Bhabha promotes the study of world literature to examine the personal experience of the marginalised and the unhomed: “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 12). Helen Tiffin (1987, p. 22), in addition, proposes a strategy she calls “canonical counter-discourse” to subvert the colonialist ideology by rereading and rewriting a European canonical text in order to unpack its colonialist assumptions: “Post-colonial counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified ‘local’” (Tiffin, 1987, p. 23). She believes that this kind of “literary revolution” is intrinsic to “social disidentification” which is the project of postcolonial literature seeking to intervene in the “originary and continuing containment” of European texts rather than to undertake the impossible mission of constructing or reconstructing national cultural identity that is independent of its colonial past (Tiffin, 1987, pp. 22-23). In this aspect, Tiffin’s argument agrees with Bhabha’s proposition that hybridity is fundamental to postcolonial identity: “Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (Tiffin, 1987, p. 17).

The present study aims to approach Sherman Alexie’s “The Search Engine” using the postcolonial critical framework related to the ‘colonialist ideology,’ focusing on the concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘subaltern,’ and to the ‘colonial subject,’ focusing on the concepts of ‘mimicry’ and ‘unhomeliness.’ The aims of the study are to investigate whether the text reveals a colonialist or anticolonialist ideology, how the text supports or subverts the colonialist ideology, and what the text suggests as an approach in dealing with the postcolonial condition. The analysis is informed by the critical theories of postcolonialism in general and by those of Helen Tiffin (1987) and Homi Bhabha (1984, 1990, 1994) in particular. The key terms used in the analysis are explained below, based on the definitions provided by Tyson (2006, pp. 417-433; 2011, pp. 245-251):

‘Colonialist ideology’ refers to the colonisers’ belief in their own superiority over the colonised. Since the colonisers believe that only their own Anglo-European/American culture is civilised, sophisticated and metropolitan, the native peoples are defined as savage, backward and undeveloped.



‘*Othering*’ refers to the colonisers’ treatment of members of the Indigenous culture as inferior and less than fully human.

‘*Subaltern*’ refers to any person at the bottom of the colonialist social ladder, whether his/her status is based on race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any cultural factor.

‘*Colonial subject*’ refers to a subaltern who internalises the colonialist belief that those different from a society’s dominant culture are inferior.

‘*Mimicry*’ refers to the imitation, by a subaltern, of the dress, speech, behavior, or lifestyle of members of the dominant culture out of a desire to belong to that culture.

‘*Unhomeliness*’ refers to the feeling of having no stable cultural identity that occurs to people who do not belong to the dominant culture and have rejected their own culture as inferior.

‘*Hybridity*’ refers to a positive alternative to unhomeliness when one’s cultural identity is experienced as a hybrid of two or more cultures.

## RESULTS: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF “THE SEARCH ENGINE”

The results of the analysis are discussed in three parts. “Suppressing the Colonial Subjects” presents the socioeconomic and psychological conditions by which marginal characters are framed, thus subjugating them to the domination of the mainstream culture and the precarious sense of abandonment. “Subverting the Colonialist Discourse” explains how the text then undermines the colonialist ideology from within using the tools perfected by the colonisers themselves. Finally, “Finetuning the Postcolonial Identity” examines the text’s proposition to reconcile the conflicting ideologies through respect and recognition at an individual level.

### SUPPRESSING THE COLONIAL SUBJECTS

As a postcolonial text, “The Search Engine” deals head-on with the hegemonic power in the American society where the politics and assumptions of white, middle-class males dominate and disenfranchise the coloured, the poor, and the women in the story. Interestingly, the only white, middle-class male that appears in the story right at the beginning is neither powerful nor indeed very masculine. He is described as “narcissistic, androgynous, lovely, and yes, charming” (Alexie, 2003, p. 2). However, as he is the only representative of his kind, he is therefore assumed to stand for the dominant discourse. He certainly speaks for it; ignoring Corliss’s earnest inquiry about a poem he was quoting, he is more interested in profiling her: “You’re Indian, aren’t you?” (Alexie, 2003, p. 4). Although Corliss soon walks away from him, she and all the other characters in the story are already framed by the inherent colonialist psychology that seeks to put race, class and gender before an individual and put the colonial subjects in their place. That all the other characters submit, at different degrees and in different manners, to such colonised consciousness even without the physical presence of a strong ruling body only confirms the prevalence of the colonialist ideology that others them.

Corliss’s extended family live in the Spokane Indian Reservation. Her parents are extremely proud of her because she is the first in the family to make it to college, hence away from the predestined “minimum-wage life of waiting tables and changing oil” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5) prescribed by “some teacher or guidance counselor” who “once told them all they could work only blue-collar jobs” (Alexie, 2003, p. 13) and subsequently inciting “individual fears and collective lack of ambition” (Alexie, 2003, p. 13). Despite their endless interrogations about Corliss’s taste for “those white books” (Alexie, 2003, p. 13), her father and his three brothers, all construction workers, never question the “authority figure who had told them to

pick up a wrench” (Alexie, 2003, p. 13) instead of a book. Since they have internalised the racist and classist rhetoric of the overarching white culture, their consciousness is colonised. They passively accept their place as subalterns at the low end of the economic scale and convince themselves that that is the only place they belong.

In contrast to her father and uncles, Corliss is fiercely ambitious. Determined to have “an original aboriginal life” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5), she makes her way to college with a good measure of self-perseverance, financial support from her extended family, and “a rich education from white people” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5) in the forms of reading lists and study guides from teachers at a local prep school: “good white people whose whiteness and goodness blended and separated” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5). Although Corliss identifies herself to be “as Spokane as a Spokane Indian can be” (Alexie, 2003: p. 6) and seems to enjoy exploiting the spell of exoticism that ethnic stereotypes occasionally cast on people: “For five centuries, Indians were slaughtered because they were Indians, so if Corliss received a free coffee now and again from the local free-range lesbian Indiophile, who could possibly find the wrong in that?” (Alexie, 2003, p. 11), she distances herself physically and intellectually from the Indigenous group that defines her demography: “How could she tell her family that she didn’t belong with them, that she was destined for something larger, that she believed she was supposed to be eccentric and powerful and great and all alone in the world?” (Alexie, 2003, pp. 14-15). She is very critical about their attitude: “Indians had learned how to stand in lines for food, love, hope, sex, and dreams, but they didn’t know how to step away” (Alexie, 2003, p. 10), customs: “Her one white ancestor, a Russian fur trapper, had been legally adopted into the tribe, given some corny Indian name she didn’t like to repeat” (Alexie, 2003, p. 6), and practices: “Indians were used to sharing and called it tribalism, but Corliss suspected it was yet another failed form of communism” (Alexie, 2003, p. 10). She refuses to share her apartment with white people because she is insecure about herself: “If she lived with a white person, Corliss knew she’d quickly be seen as ordinary, because she was ordinary” (Alexie, 2003, p. 11). She refuses to share her apartment with other Indians because she is insecure with them: “If she took an Indian roommate, Corliss knew she’d soon be taking in the roommate’s cousin, little brother, half uncle, and long-lost dog, and none of them would contribute anything toward the rent other than wispy apologies (Alexie, 2003, pp. 9-10). In short, in many ways Corliss’s perception of her tribesmen mimics that of a coloniser. The “original aboriginal life” (Alexie, 2003, p. 5) she sets her sight on is very likely the kind of unoriginal mainstream life enjoyed by many in the dominant white culture. Since mimicry is a form of self-negation – or self-othering – by othering her tribesmen for their deviation from the mainstream culture, Corliss also others herself for being “as Spokane as a Spokane Indian can be” (Alexie, 2003: p. 6). Having a foot in two clashing cultures but a sense of belonging in neither, Corliss is “approximately homeless” (Alexie, 2003, p. 29). In spite of her single-occupant apartment, she is essentially unhomed.

Like Corliss, Harlan Atwater is no stranger to the feeling of unhomeliness. Adopted by a white couple: “the two best, the two most honorable and loyal people” (Alexie, 2003: p. 52), he grew up “a lost bird” (Alexie, 2003, p. 40) in metropolitan Seattle, a five-hour drive from Spokane, all the while yearning to know what it would be like to “feel more Indian” (Alexie, 2003, p. 41). As a young man in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an exciting time for poetry in general and for Native American writers in particular, Harlan dealt with his double consciousness by writing poems about the Indian experience of growing up on the reservation and reading them at venues around town to thrilled white audiences who “looked at me on stage, looking as Indian as I do, with my dark skin and long hair and big nose and cheekbones, and they didn’t know my poems were just pretend ... those white people loved me” (Alexie, 2003, p. 42). Mimicking the Indian stereotypes, in other words, was an approach he took to appease his sense of alienation both amongst the white and amidst the coloured. White beauties

fell into bed with him intent to redeem him of the Indigenous pain he never suffered. Indigenous drunks, on the other hand, bought him drinks for the poetic pain he feigned but threw away the poetry he wrote. Displaced, disoriented and discontent, he felt like a fake in both worlds, as reflected in his ‘fake’ name “Harlan Atwater” that is recognised neither by “the unofficial historian of the urban Spokane Indians” (Alexie, 2003, p. 19) nor by the official “government forms” in the Spokane Tribal Enrollment Office (Alexie, 2003, p. 20).

Curiously, “The Search Engine,” in spite of its predominant Native American characters, also illustrates the pronouncements of the physical and psychological displacement on a non-Native American character, a white homeless man – a former college professor – hence suggesting that such angst is universal and independent of race and class. “Professor Williams,” (Alexie, 2003, p. 31) as he was once regarded, felt overlooked and othered by his colleagues and students: “I felt their disrespect growing all around me. I felt suffocated by their disrespect” (Alexie, 2003, p. 31). After an unsettling episode of a nervous breakdown in which he repeatedly shouted “I want some respect!” (Alexie, 2003, p. 31) in the campus center for twenty-seven hours straight, he was “Diagnosed and prescribed” (Alexie, 2003, p. 30) by the medical authority as suffering from “a pathological need for respect” (Alexie, 2003, p. 30). He then left his mainstream life and acted out this institutional sentence by mimicking the unconventional rank of social outcasts on the streets. When Corliss meets this self-imposed subaltern in Seattle, he is a picture of contradiction – dirty and proud, begging and bright, handsome and homeless, displaced but not defeated – an amalgamation of the two opposing worlds he never quite belongs.

In short, “The Search Engine” exhibits subalterns – Native and non-Native, male and female – who are othered and displaced by the colonialist hegemony that gives them ideological symptoms typical of the colonial subjects: unhomeliness and mimicry. As these characters are, for the most part, portrayed sympathetically, it could be said that the text implies a disagreement with the colonialist ideology. It is, therefore, anti-colonialist.

#### SUBVERTING THE COLONIALIST DISCOURSE

Even though “The Search Engine” subscribes to the stereotypes of physical looks and social circumstances which privilege the Anglo-European/American traditions and suppress the rest, it seems to do so only to maximise the drama of ideological subversion played relentlessly in Corliss’s action and introspection. Being “contradictory and young and confused and smart and unformed and ambitious” (Alexie, 2003, p. 14), Corliss is intellectually equipped to fend for her place in the white’s world using the very tools the colonisers exploit to keep her kind under their thumb: Christianity and history.

Regardless of the goodwill of certain politicians and churchmen who naively believed that “conversion to Christianity would quickly, humanely, and permanently solve the Indian question” (Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.), the collective experience of Native Americans in this regard could safely be said to display a different picture. The failure of the Christian efforts was due partly to the “fundamental differences between Christianity and Indian spirituality” (Townsend, 2019, p. 367) and largely to “a disconnect between the words and behavior of Christians” (Townsend, 2019, p. 366). Christianity became another colonial device imposed to other and unhome the native population. The stigma caused by such imposition is reflected in “The Search Engine” as personal and cautionary. Abhorred by Corliss’s interest in the poetry written by a nineteenth-century Jesuit priest, her father gives a desperate warning: “Oh, Corliss, those Catholics were the worst. Your grandmother still has scars on her back from when a priest and a nun whipped her in boarding school. You shouldn’t be reading that stuff. It will pollute your heart” (Alexie, 2003, p. 14).



Corliss, on the other hand, finds more comfort from a “sad and lonely and lovely ... old white man in a white collar and black robe” (Alexie, 2003, pp. 14-15) than from her family and friends. She crosses all kinds of ideological boundaries – racism, classism, sexism – when she identifies with the white man: “maybe she was also a Jesuit priest who found it [comfort] in poetry” (Alexie, 2003, p. 14). Assuming this mental frame of authority, Corliss quickly manages to subvert the colonialist division between ‘us’ – the civilised, the moral, the intelligent – and ‘them’ – the savage, the immoral, the unintelligent (Tyson, 2011 p. 248) – and to probe whether “the demonic other” (Tyson, 2006, p. 420) is not also a descriptor applicable to the ‘idealised’ white male, a perfect Aryan model, at the beginning of the story. In just one page of interaction, Corliss reveals him to be uncivilised, immoral, unintelligent and very un-Christian, thus contesting the imperialist paradigm of white supremacism and blurring the borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’:

“I’ve never read Auden’s poems. Not much, anyway. I read some article about him. They quoted him on the thing about Jews and poems. I don’t know where they got it from. But it’s true, don’t you think?”

“What’s true?”

“A good gun will always beat a good poem.”

“I hope not,” Corliss said and walked away.”

(Alexie, 2003, p. 4)

Instead of holding her back, Christian themes frequently help Corliss forward her personal agendas, usually with a palpable degree of sarcasm. Sneering at the West’s penchant for tall, thin and pretty women, Corliss, who is herself “a few inches under five feet, maybe thirty pounds overweight, and plain-featured” (Alexie, 2003, p. 4), sees herself as a ‘saviour’ of followers of such sexist discourse. On the first page of the story, a blond, blue-eyed bulimic is telepathically saved by Corliss’s telepathic charity: “Corliss wanted to buy the skeletal woman a sandwich, ten sandwiches, and a big bowl of vanilla ice cream. Eat, young woman, eat, Corliss thought, and you will be *redeemed*” (Alexie, 2003, p. 1; emphasis added). Campaigning for Harlan’s second wind of poetry writing many pages later on, she likens him to a born-again Christian whose literary career and poetry are salvaged by Corliss the Saviour: “Maybe there was hope for him. She felt evangelical. Maybe she could *save* him. Maybe she’d pray for him and he’d fall to his knees in the bookstore and beg for *salvation* and *resurrection*” (Alexie, 2003, p. 36; emphasis added). By parodying the authoritative discourse of the Church, hence creating an ambivalent “area between mimicry and mockery” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 127), Corliss effectively undermines Colonialism from within.

Another common type of colonialist authority exposed and expunged by Corliss is history. Traditional history, to Tiffin (1987, pp. 19-22) as well as to the general postcolonial scholars, is essentially the story of the conquerors and subsequently functions to glorify the victors and vilify the vanquished. In this sense, history serves the ruling class in the same way that the great traditions of literature do. By emphasising the ideal of the ‘universality’ of Anglo-European cultures through the use of the English language and the fostering of Anglo-European values and codes in literary works, for instance, the colonisers’ discourse is enshrined as axiomatic while the colonised are challenged by “the policies of either assimilation or apartheid” (Tiffin, 1987, p. 19). For this, Tiffin bunches history in the same categorisation as fiction: “Explorers’ journals, drama, fiction, historical accounts, ‘mapping’ enabled conquests and colonisation and the capture and/or vilification of alterity” (Tiffin, 1987: p. 22). In “The Search Engine,” Corliss, it seems, makes it her mission to contest the centrality of mainstream history and literary canon by amplifying the voice of the conquered, undercutting the voice of the authority, and rewriting a classic tale, as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

With the exception of a flashback to the year 1973 which is recounted in the third person through Harlan’s point of view, the third-person point of view that narrates “The Search Engine” is Corliss’s. It then follows that the story is revealed through the subjective worldview

of an intelligent Native American teenage girl – unsung yet unsilenced. One topic that Corliss is very vocal about is American history. When the story opens, she is reading an American history textbook, the content of which is implied to be dangerously simplistic, self-serving and surreal: “College was an extreme sport for an Indian woman ... Maybe she should be awarded gold medals for taking American history and not shooting everybody during the hour and a half in which they covered five hundred years of Indian history” (Alexie, 2003, pp. 29-30). When she looks up from the textbook, she sees a white couple sitting nearby and performing courtship “with theatrical pleasure” (Alexie, 2003, p. 1). Corliss then starts to ‘read’ the young, blond couple and quickly becomes irritated with them. It is very tempting to see this beautiful couple as the romanticised America in the textbook. The theatricality of the courtship is then analogous to that of the construction of American history. Likewise, Corliss’s unconcealed contempt for and criticisms of the couple are the echo of the sentiments she has for ‘textbook’ American history. As Corliss’s is the only voice that is heard with authority in this instance (the others’ are either mocked, such as that of the “lazy” (Alexie, 2003, p. 4) white boy’s, or minimised, such as that of the “skeletal” (Alexie, 2003, p. 1) white girl’s), it is the underclass – a poor, Native American girl – that has the upper hand here.

Corliss, furthermore, is not fooled by an illusion of authority, rationality and objectivity that helps maintain the clout of history and makes it a common ideological conditioning tool. To her, “‘historian’ and ‘pathological liar’ meant the same thing in all cultures and countries” (Alexie, 2003, p. 19). To prove her point, she gives an account of “the *unofficial* historian of the urban Spokane Indians” who “told lies during her manic phases and heavily exaggerated during her depressed times” and who is Corliss’s own “bipolar,” “smart” and “crazy” mother (Alexie, 2003, pp. 18-19; emphasis added). History, as a result, is not only unmasked as a string of unrestrained muddled-up lies but also unmanned and stripped of its ‘official’ rank.

Finally, using what Tiffin (1987, p. 22) terms “canonical counter-discourse,” Corliss exposes the complicity between narrativisation and political oppression in a classic epic, *The Odyssey*. The epic’s eponymous Greek king is reread as “a drug addict and a thief who abused the disabled” – referring to Odysseus’s struggle to sail away from the Lotus Eaters and their addictive lotuses and his blinding the Cyclops Polyphemus after ransacking the latter’s food storage; a “self-serving and vain” boss – referring to his doing away with six crew members in exchange for his own survival in an encounter with six-headed monster Scylla; and “a romantic fool” – referring to his infidelity to his wife while demanding fidelity from her (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). By reconstructing the tale from the point of view of the subjugated – the blinded monster, the sacrificed soldiers and the cheated wife – Corliss exhibits Odysseus not as a noble, brave and wise hero as described by Homer and drilled into the collective consciousness by the ruling class to preserve their status quo, but as a bully, a coward and a fool. The revisionist tale unveils abuses conspired by the rulers and subverts the discursive strategies they employ: “Homer had transformed a lying colonial asshole into one of the most admired literary figures in human history. So, Corliss asked, what lessons could we learn from Homer? To be considered epic, one needed only to employ an epic biographer” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). *The Odyssey*, as it turns out, is not unlike the ‘official’ American history in that it is a fantasy constructed by the unquestionable authority as “a powerful piece of military propaganda” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). Also, by reconstructing Odysseus’s tale, Corliss humanises the Greek warrior and makes it feasible for mere mortals, even marginalised ones, to be like him: “Hell, maybe she was Homer. Maybe she was Odysseus ... Maybe every human journey was epic” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28).

In short, “The Search Engine” subverts the colonialist ideology by unpacking and then repacking two of the most familiarised forms of colonial discourse: Christianity and history. Christianity is revealed to be painfully associated with Native American experience on a personal level. Christian terminology, however, is appropriated by Corliss who uses it with the

condescension characteristic of a bad priest, thus making fun of it yet making the most out of it. Similarly, history is revealed to cater to the disadvantage of the colonised and bolster the interest of the colonisers. By revisiting the dominant historical and literary texts through the eyes of the oppressed, Corliss reveals the complicit control monopolised by canonical texts as well as empowers the marginalised to voice their side of the story and contest the imperial roar that traditionally and historically commands the texts.

#### FINETUNING THE POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

Corliss likens her journey to find Harlan to a ‘vision quest,’ an Indian-style odyssey to search for self-definition and come to terms with selfhood: “Long ago, as part of the passage into adulthood, young Indians used to wander into wilderness in search of a vision, in search of meaning and definition. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Ancient questions answered by ancient ceremonies” (Alexie, 2003, p. 27). This vision quest, therefore, is by extension a journey to find Corliss’s own postcolonial Indian self. Her eureka moment arrives, characteristically with blasphemy and doubt, after her eight-hour bus ride to Seattle and long before the story ends: “Hell, maybe she was Homer. Maybe she was Odysseus ... Maybe every human journey was epic” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). In that instant, she arrives at three anticolonialist epiphanies. First, we are the authors of our respective histories. Second, we are the heroes of our respective histories. Third, we champion our respective histories. With this new confidence in humanity, she befriends a homeless man outside a McDonald’s because she “decided he could be epic” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). Seeing him as a hero of his own history, Corliss treats him with respect: “You give directions [to Harlan’s address] out of the goodness of your heart. And I’ll buy you lunch out of the goodness of my heart” (Alexie, 2003, p. 29). The homeless man calls this display of respect “a safe and sane human interaction” (Alexie, 2003, p. 29). In other words, respect makes him human again. Being disrespected, he is ‘sub-human’ – marginalised. By being kind, Corliss demarginalises the homeless and ‘rehumanises’ him: “Thank you for the acknowledgment of my humanity. A man like me doesn’t get to be human much” (Alexie, 2003, p. 30). Sharing a “Super Value Meal” (Alexie, 2003, p. 29) with this dirty, hungry homeless, Corliss learns the magic power of respect. It is worth pointing out that prior to this journey, this is an unfamiliar concept to her. As a “confused indigenous woman negotiating her way through a colonial maze” (Alexie, 2003, p. 27), Corliss may not have had much experience with respect from others, but she certainly is not generous with it either. As a matter of fact, she is constantly disrespectful and hands out scorn indiscriminately to families and strangers alike. Ironically, the homeless man who is pathologically in need of respect guides her to see that the need for respect is not pathological at all but intrinsically human. In the end, she may not be able to drive away his demons, and he still has his own war to fight: “This handsome homeless man was not defeated. He was still fighting his monsters, and maybe he’d someday win” (Alexie, 2003, p. 28), but it is comforting to know that this “war against the imperial forces of cynicism and irony” (Alexie, 2003, p. 29) can be eased, a day at a time, through human interaction based on mutual respect. Corliss encapsulates this new insight, and a change of heart, in a simple statement: “I am kind because you are kind” (Alexie, 2003, p. 31).

Contrary to the ‘human’ characters who populate Corliss’s pre-Seattle story and have had their share of her projected “contempt” (Alexie, 2003, pp. 2-13), Corliss’s favourite poets receive her undivided devotion and are worshiped in her “bookstore ceremony”: “She found the books by her favorite authors – Whitman, Shapiro, Jordan, Turcotte, Plath, Lourie, O’Hara, Hershon, Alvarez, Brook, Schreiber, Pawlak, Offutt, Duncan, Moore – and reshelved them with their front covers facing outward. The other books led with their spines, but Corliss’s favorites led with their chests, bellies, crotches, and faces” (Alexie, 2003, p. 38). These artists

are, like Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain and Bruce Lee, “superheroes” (Alexie, 2003, p. 27) and are, therefore, in a universe inaccessible by Corliss & Co. Now that Corliss has been enabled to recognise and respect a hero in an everyday individual, the ‘universes’ commingle and the heroes interact – and, undoubtedly, occasionally fight – in the dynamic space of a new postcolonial paradigm. She comes to appreciate “a productive, exciting, positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid” (Tyson, 2006, p. 422) and finetunes her evaluation of the new hybridised environment. Seeing Harlan as epic in his own right, Corliss reverently places the library copy of his poetry in the used-book store “with its front cover facing outward for all the world to see” (Alexie, 2003, p. 52) along with other ‘heroes’ of hers, willing to negotiate the library fine, a day at a time. As for herself, acclimating to the postcolonial hybridity will be ongoing and likely challenging, but she knows exactly where she is heading – home: “and then she left the bookstore and began her small journey back home” (Alexie, 2003, p. 52).

Harlan himself found ‘home’ long before he met Corliss. Having mimicked Indianness and been disillusioned by it, he gradually came to feel at home with and have great respect for his white “best,” “most honorable and loyal” parents (Alexie, 2003, p. 52). The steadfast loyalty between parents and son may not be glamorous but certainly admirable: “They’re old and sick. They took care of me then. I take care of them now” (Alexie, 2003, p. 50). As a fully-integrated urban Indian, Harlan’s looks may be at odds with and even overshadowed by the big city setting, but he has found his place not at the margins but right in the middle of it. Harlan and the house could metaphorically be read as one and the same: “a tiny, battered, eighty-year-old house set among recently constructed condominiums and apartment buildings” (Alexie, 2003, p. 32). It would be nice but grossly misleading to say that he has won the battle against his demons because he obviously has not. He still feels very much conflicted about his identity: “I just kept thinking God had chosen me, had chosen these two white people to swoop in and save me. Do you know how terrible it is to feel that way? And how good it feels, too?” (Alexie, 2003, p. 52). But he has learned to embrace “the multiple and often conflicting aspects of the blended culture that is [his] and that is an indelible fact of history” (Tyson, 2006, p. 422). He even verbalises contentment with his life’s journey: “I’m going to retire at the end of the year. I’ve got a big pension coming. It’s good money, honest work ...” (Alexie, 2003, p. 50), with or without his book on the shelf in the poetry section and with or without his identification in the search engine.

“What’s your name?” she asked him. “What’s your real name?”

Harlan Atwater faced her. He smiled, turned away, and walked out of the store. She could follow him and ask for more. She could demand to know his real name. She could interrogate him for days and attempt to separate his truth from his lies and his exaggerations from his omissions. But she let him go. She understood she was supposed to let him go. (Alexie, 2003, p. 52)

In short, “The Search Engine” champions humanity. Every man has a right to be respected because he is a hero in his own adventure. Respect, the story suggests, demarginalises and democratises the postcolonial landscape and makes it ever evolving. For the othered and the unhomed, this new paradigm can derail the trajectory of oppression and discrimination, even if temporarily. However, postcolonial identities are also constantly changing and, inevitably, clashing. Hybridising the conflicting identities is recommended as a way to make peace with warring ideologies. The hybrid identity may not be glamorous. It may not even be named. But by then, you are already home, and the search for identification is no longer imperative.



## CONCLUSION

The present study reads Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine" based on the critical frameworks of postcolonialism with specific references to Bhabha's concept of otherness, mimicry, unhomeliness, and hybridity (1984, 1990, 1994) and Tiffin's concept of canonical counter-discourse (1987). Following the objectives set for the study, the analysis reveals that the text projects an anticolonialist ideology, that it subverts the colonialist ideology, and that it suggests an approach to deal with the postcolonial condition. The results are recaptured in three parts as follows.

In "Suppressing the Colonial Subjects," the analysis presents the socioeconomic and psychological conditions by which marginal characters – Native and non-Native, male and female – are framed, and explains how these conditions subjugate them to the domination of the mainstream culture and the ideological symptoms typical of the colonial subjects: unhomeliness and mimicry. As these characters are portrayed sympathetically, it could be said that the text is anticolonialist.

In "Subverting the Colonialist Discourse" the analysis explains how the text undermines the colonialist ideology from within using the most familiarised forms of colonial discourse: Christianity and history. While Christian terms are deconsecrated by Corliss's secular use, history, in the form of a canonical text, is revisited through the eyes of the marginalised, thus unsilencing the minorities and allowing them to voice their side of the story.

In "Finetuning the Postcolonial Identity," the analysis examines the text's proposition to reconcile conflicting ideologies through respect and recognition at an individual level. Respect, the story suggests, demarginalises and democratises the postcolonial landscape and makes it ever evolving. However, postcolonial identities are also constantly changing and clashing. Hybridising the conflicting identities is recommended as a way to negotiate the warring ideologies.

To conclude with the terms borrowed from Barry (2009, p. 189), "The Search Engine" 'adopts' the colonial form of literature, 'adapts' it by the intervention of native subject matters, and finally becomes 'adept' both stylistically and thematically at adjusting to the postcolonial condition not as "an antagonistic 'them and us' tribalism" but as "a broader, more universal view of the human condition" (Westron, 2010).

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