

Sherman alexie's survival equation and the resilience of native american culture



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* portrays the hardships faced by Native Americans at the hands of the overpowering force of mainstream American culture. Alexie uses multiple perspectives in his book to convey the complexity of the situation on the reservation. However, his recurring themes such as survival, tradition, and underlying cultural ties connect the stories together as does the overarching message about the resilience of Native American people and their culture. With these consistent themes, the multiple perspectives found in his stories prove the validity of his cultural points due to their repetition. In his composite novel, Alexie reveals the resilience of Native American culture by breaking it down into a mathematical equation that makes an important statement about the survival of Native American culture.

Alexie brings to light the importance of imagination through his illustration of the process of survival: “Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation” (150). The ability to imagine a better world or a better situation is a coping mechanism for the Native Americans. One way they do this is through storytelling. This is shown when the narrator of “A Good Story” tells a happy story at the request of his mother. He observes the poor situation he and his mother are in at the beginning of the story with no food in their cabinets and only sad stories. He concocts a lighthearted story for his mother and in the end states, “Believe me, there is just barely enough goodness in all of this” (Alexie 144). Using imagination to form a simple story that painted a pleasing picture was enough to make the hardships of life seem bearable. In this case, the use of imagination was “barely enough.” Alexie attributes the power of such imagination to its

necessity in Native American society in his epigraph for the chapter “Imagining the Reservation,” which is a quote from Lawrence Thornton: “ We have to believe in the power of imagination because it’s all we have and ours is stronger than theirs” (Alexie 149). This quote comes from one of Thornton’s novels where a character is in a situation similar to the Native Americans because he is left to imagine his country the way it was in the past to deal with the declining situation of the present. This quote itself conveys that imagination is stronger in the Native American society because it is integral to their survival. The necessity of imagination is also exemplified in the story by the need for tradition and the deeply rooted need for stories as a connection to tradition. This is shown when Victor decides to let Thomas accompany him to Arizona. He lets him go because he “ felt a sudden need for tradition” (Alexie 62). Imagination is strengthened by its necessity and the necessity of it is extensive because of the roots imagination has in their tradition of storytelling. With this in mind, Alexie’s composite novel can be viewed as a product of necessity and imagination with the purpose of carrying on a piece of Native American culture.

While conveying its necessity and potency, Alexie conveys that the Indian imagination is being tethered in modern American society. The narrator in “Imagining the Reservation” poses an important question concerning the effect of modern society on Indian imagination: “ How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt? (Alexie 152). Native American culture only finds a place in society by incorporating modern day American culture into its expression. In the subsequent lines, Alexie furthers this restriction: “ How do we imagine a

new life when a pocketful of quarters weighs our possibilities down?" (152). Not only is their expression in society limited, but their culture's survival in general is threatened in a materialistic society. This book shows that a culture that favors storytelling, dancing, and ancestral connections struggles to survive amidst mainstream American culture, which is focused on the material factors in society including monetary value and gain.

The tension between the two competing cultures in the book that is tethering the Native American imagination also brings to light the differences between those two cultures, which produces anger among the Indian population, the second factor in Alexie's survival equation. Rather than traditional anger, he seems to suggest that anger is meant to refer to the recognition of the suppression of their culture by the invading forces of American culture, which should foster a conscious need to remain separate from said culture. In "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," Thomas states: "Some may have wanted to kill me for my arrogance, but others respected my anger, my refusal to admit defeat" (Alexie 98). If this sentiment were transposed into another equation similar to the survival equation Alexie wrote about, it would read "anger = resilience." Anger is rooted in the wrongs of the past for the Native Americans. When combined, as Alexie suggests in his equation, with a strong imagination that can envision a better world or at least a future where Indian culture can be positively viewed, the product is survival in the present.

In Alexie's portrayal of Native American culture, he reveals a culture that, on the surface, appears to be disappearing while conveying that, with its deep roots, it has the ability to withstand the oppression put upon it by <https://assignbuster.com/sherman-alexies-survival-equation-and-the-resilience-of-native-american-culture/>

mainstream American culture. He reveals the keys to achieving survival to be imagination paired with anger or more specifically the refusal to give up or give in. Imagination among Native Americans is manifested in their storytelling, a tradition that is deeply rooted in their culture, and also provides a coping mechanism to use amidst oppressive conditions. With this explanation, Alexie's composite novel, which conveys the resilience of Native Americans (anger) through the telling of multiple stories (imagination), can be seen as an aide to survival that serves to inform everyone of the situation and the true culture of his people, which is disappearing in mainstream America. His survival equation encapsulates his reason for writing.