

The dangers of liminality: analyzing the mentality of john smith



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Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* is remarkably focused on identity. One of his larger points seems to be that individual identity has a lot to do with feeling a part of a larger group. The central character, John Smith, is a Native American who was adopted by a white family, which effectively cut him off from his true identity. Due to John Smith's inability to fully integrate into any one identity and his existence out of time, he is forced to lead a solitary and unfulfilling life, while imagining the life he could have lived.

The imagined version of John's birth is an excellent example of his complete disconnect from his home. The location is described as "On this reservation or that reservation. Any reservation, a particular reservation," which really emphasizes that John does not know where he comes from (Alexie 3). This description is purposefully vague to highlight that John's past is equally nebulous. He does not know what reservation he came from, only that he came from a reservation. He has a broad idea of what he is supposed to be because he knows he is Native American, but still lacks the specifics. Then, when John imagines he is being taken from the reservation, "The helicopter gunman locks and loads, strafes the reservation with explosive shells," effectively destroying John's origins (Alexie 6). Keeping in mind that the audience cannot know what is real here, the gunfire can be seen as a metaphorical ruination of John's beginnings and home. John can never return there, so its physical existence almost does not matter to his story. John cannot know the circumstances of his birth and therefore creates this unspecific past that mirrors the murkiness of his life in a depressing attempt to understand himself.

One of the worst aspects of John losing that part of his identity is how hard his parents work to make sure he can understand and maintain a strong link to his culture. His mother “ would do research on Native American history and culture... She had learned a few words in many Indian languages. From books, Western movies, documentaries,” which shows how much time she put into trying to understand this culture and pass it on to her son (Alexie 12). But unfortunately, she does not access consistently correct information. For example, gaining knowledge about Native American culture through Western movies is inherently flawed. The Native Americans are consistently cast as the wild and savage other that the white man must overcome. In addition, these movies are made by white men, which means they have very little authority, if any, about the culture of Native Americans. Subsequently, John learns broadly about his culture in the same way a white person would, rather than the specifics he would have learned if he had been left on his reservation. Even his first interaction with his mother carries these hints of wrongness as “ John takes the white woman’s right nipple into his mouth and pulls at her breast, he discovers it is empty,” (Alexie 8). While the biology behind this moment indicates that it would take the mother some time to begin to produce milk, this moment serves a greater metaphorical meaning. The lack of milk indicates that no matter how hard she may try, John’s mother does not have the biological or historical background to properly provide for her new son. She lacks the knowledge his birthmother had that would make him able to understand and take part in his culture, and consequently fill out his identity. This inability to provide the cultural pieces John needs to understand himself causes the relationship between John and his parents to be strained.

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This emotional distance from John's parents is mirrored in the physical distance from them when he moves to Seattle. Firstly, it takes them a "long time" to drive from their home to his apartment (Alexie 116). While the fact that it is only a drive separating them means he is within a reasonable distance, the drive seems to be long enough that the Smiths do not visit very regularly. This feels purposeful on John's part as he does not seem to crave affection from his adoptive parents and, like a teenager, seems to resent their intrusions into his life. His lack of care for his parents is supported by the fact that "She had done this so often before, Daniel knocking and knocking, while John sat inside, ignoring them," (Alexie 115). The fact that John would just sit inside his apartment and refuse to see his parents after they drove a long distance to come see him shows that John does not care about the Smiths as much as they care about him. He physically cuts off his family, rendering himself incredibly alone, as they are two of the only characters that work to take an active role in his life. It almost feels as though he is isolating himself as a punishment to his parents for taking him away from his true home. He clearly resents that he is not fully integrated into his community and places some of the blame on them. While this is understandable, it is also heartbreaking because his parents really do care for him and want what's best for him. Placing all this distance between them just makes John feel more alone and apart from a group, and therefore even more unsure of his true identity.

The city of Seattle itself extends this kind of transience. Being in a city allows John to blend in more, especially as "Indians were often seen walking in downtown Seattle," which means he stands out less than he did during his

childhood (Alexie 30). He does not have to be the adopted child of a white couple that does not know where he came from. John can just be another Indian walking down the street. This means that he does not have to prove himself as Native American, because everyone walking down the street with him will assume that he understands his identity and will not doubt it by looking at him. The ability to blend into a crowd allows John anonymity, and with his anonymity, John can pretend that he is secure in who he is and how he got there. Additionally, there is the fact that Seattle has a large variety of Indian tribes present. Because of this, John can appropriate particular tribal identities without getting caught. He is not limited by what is logical in terms of location. In this way, he is dually a part of all tribes and a part of none.

This inability to be easily defined keeps John on the outskirts of both white and Indian culture. When John says, “ When asked by white people, he said he was Sioux, because that was what they wanted him to be. When asked by Indian people, he said he was Navajo, because that was what he wanted to be,” he highlights how much of his identity is based on how he relates to other people (Alexie 32). There exists some agency in this as John chooses his identity based on his audience and thus controls the way in which he is perceived, but it also emphasizes just how lost he is. By picking and choosing what he is and when, he avoids fully integrating into any one group. This just perpetuates his liminal status and creates more fear that people will learn of his lies. As he thinks when he initially meets Marie, “ He was afraid she would discover that he was an Indian without a tribe,” (Alexie 35). Even when he tries to participate in Native American activities, he cannot fully enjoy it because of his nerves. This inability to share information about his life means

that John cannot have true friends that really know him. Considering he does not know his own identity, it makes it all the much harder for someone else to understand him. By not sharing the truth about himself, partially as a result of not knowing the full truth about his background, John further isolates himself by making it nearly impossible to make lasting bonds of friendship. This isolation is the true consequence of his liminal status.

The city is also relevant to John's identity in that John is building the last skyscraper in Seattle. The skyscraper is where he first decides that he "needed to kill a white man," and ultimately where he decides to kill himself (Alexie 25). Because of this, the skyscraper is clearly an important place. While there is the association between the skyscraper and white, masculine power, especially in a capitalistic and imperialist context, that is not why the skyscraper resonates with John and the audience. In many ways, the skyscraper can be seen as a metaphor for John. For one, they are both rooted in a Native American past, as the land originally belonged to Indians, but are raised in a predominantly white culture, essentially erasing those roots. They are both effectively the last of their kind, because John does not fully inhabit any identity, which makes him both the first and last of his kind, and there will never be another skyscraper built in Seattle. John does not connect with his past and he does not have a future planned beyond building this skyscraper. Because of this, he exists somewhat out of time because he is not rooted to a past or a future, or even to any of the people in the present. This idea is remarkably interesting because of what it says about the relationship between past and future. Without a past, it is almost as if a

person is doomed to not have a future. They are stuck in one eternal moment, unable to cycle and grow.

For John, this eternal moment is falling. From his first imagined memory, “ he wants to fall,” out of the helicopter and “ past the skyscrapers” (Alexie 7).

This thought so early on implies that John is falling throughout the novel, in a kind of helpless separation from the world around him, and that his ultimate step off the skyscraper is really just the culmination of what has been happening all along. His life has been stalled due to his inability to know himself or feel comfortable in a single identity. This naturally stresses him and causes his seclusion and subsequent depression. During John’s fall, Alexie uses the word “ time,” six times in one paragraph to emphasize that this tiny moment of time is when John feels most at peace (Alexie 412).

Focusing on time in this moment makes it feel as though John is falling through time, not rooted to any one period. It is almost as if he does not want to exist on this physical level, bound by conventions of time and history, or cannot due to his missing cultural identity. Drawing the parallel between his infantile desire to fall and his suicide brings these two moments together, linking birth and death in a way that could imply that all of time happens at once. As he is falling, John can finally pull away from the linear interpretation of time. Instead of existing chronologically, John’s life is like a series of blocks stacked on top of each other that he experiences all at once as he jumps off the skyscraper. The blocks do not extend horizontally towards past or future and simply exist as a slice of time remarkably separated from a historical concept of time.

The interaction of John's spirit with his dead body plays an interesting role in this idea of time and identity. As a spirit, " he pulled the wallet from the body's blue jeans, found the photograph inside, and recognized the faces," indicating that he views these objects as more of a memory than a part of his life (Alexie 412). John's death effectively frees him from his worldly concerns and seems to relieve some of the stress that comes with him not knowing his identity. It also allows him to be removed from the constant state of falling of his life. This is the first time he feels really stable. After that, " John stood, stepped over that body, and strode into the desert," which makes a parallel between John and Father Duncan's fate (Alexie 413). Firstly, as he describes his body, he uses " that," pointing out that he no longer has any connection to it. He just steps over it without reminiscing or seeming to have any attachment to the life he lived. The parallel of him leaving into the desert emphasizes the way he completely cuts himself away from his life, the way Father Duncan was never seen or heard from again. Then, John claims that " An Indian father was out there beyond the horizon. And maybe an Indian mother with a scar on her belly from a Cesarean birth," showing that in death he may be able to understand his identity in a way that he could not in life (Alexie 413). This very much highlights the fact that he feels as though his life was stolen when he was taken from his mother as he can only achieve his true identity through death. This also explains John's choice of suicide because he sees little value in his relationships and life on earth, but sees a potential for connecting with his parents in the afterlife. The ease at which John leaves his life and the possibilities he sees in his afterlife emphasizes an idea of justice in death, and while suicide is an upsetting end to a life, it seems to have freed John.

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This focus on the spiritual nature of death naturally brings with it the idea of the Indian Killer. When the reader sees that “with this mask, with this mystery, the killer can dance forever,” it becomes clear there are larger spiritual forces at work here (Alexie 420). If the killer has some kind of immortality, they become less of a person and more of a physical representation of an entire culture’s anger. This is one of the reasons it is difficult to believe John would be the Indian killer. Even though he had some murderous feelings, John’s death highlights the little concern he has for the physical world. Had he been the Indian Killer, it would possibly be one of his greatest moments of agency within the novel. It would show an attempt to change something and claim an identity, but the Indian Killer is bigger than just one person. Even if they truly are just one person, what they represent is what matters. Maybe John’s anger toward the white culture that stole his identity contributes to the power of the Indian Killer, but John as an individual does not seem truly capable of murder, especially not a large-scale plan of serial murders. He is just a confused, sad person looking for his place in the world.

That is truly the key to understanding John. His lack of identity makes it difficult to form lasting attachments and truly know others, because he does not know himself. Because of this, he becomes lonely and depressed, showing that identity not only has effects on how one views oneself, but in how a person tries to relate to others. Without an identity, John does not even try to form lasting and meaningful connections. Additionally, not knowing his ancestral past gives him an interesting relationship with time as he does not have a past or a future, until he dies and finds a future within

the afterlife. The fact that he believes he can only find happiness and connections in the afterlife indicates the horribly depressing aspects of not knowing oneself. Through John, Alexie places utmost importance on understanding oneself, especially in relation to others, to have a fulfilling life. Especially in John's case, relating to an identity that is more difficult to access, connection to one's culture is vitally important to developing beliefs and an understanding of the world.