ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE AND REVIVING AUTHORSHIP: COUNTERING BARTHES IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *THE SUMMER OF BLACK WIDOWS*

Atif Hayat
atif.hayat898@gmail.com
Lecturer in FGEI
Muhammad Arsalan
arsalkhanbaloch396@gmail.com
English lecturer at Aspire College Muridke
Aqsa Nasir Paracha
aqsaparacha2005@gmail.com
BS English Scholar

Abstract
Roland Barthes' theory of interpretation of a text, The Death of the Author, neglects the role of author in construction of meaning of a text. Barthes theory gives reader an authority to interpret a work. This paper studies Sherman Alexie's The Summer of Black Widows in counter to Barthes' theory by showing that a reader cannot interpret a literary work by siding its creator. This paper also answers the questions that which symbols were used by Sherman Alexie and what were his intentions behind using those symbols. This qualitative research is conducted by using the text as a sample and data is collected by closed reading of the text. Through interpretations of symbols, this paper unravels the horrific deeds of genocide and ecocide committed by Euro-Americans. For Barthes symbols have universal meanings but this papers counters his idea by analyzing symbols in The Summer of Black Widows by keeping in view the authorial intentions. The paper questions the metaphorical death of an author and labels it as a fallacy as texts and their intrinsic elements carry the experiences and thoughts of its creator.

Keywords: The Summer of Black Widows, Symbols, Sherman Alexie, Death of the author

Introduction

The colonial discourse always constructs the colonized as savages, uncivilized and barbarians. The colonizer discourse defines the things through the binaries, as it defined the colonized people as Orients in opposition to the Occident. It painted the Occident as civilized, cultured, educated and superior while the Orients have been pictured as anything but civilized and cultured. The Orient writers from different colonized countries came forward and opposed constructed version of their identity and culture. In Native American Literature, Sherman Alexie is also one of those writers who faces bravely the Occident and shows them the horrors committed by the colonizers in the name of civilization. Through his work, *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie introduces his rich native American culture, where even animals and plants were not harmed. In his book, he shows: how native Americans used to live together, shared things, respected nature, treated animals and plants on the principle of equality. This book presents the deterioration of the Native American culture by the colonizers, how the Europeans utilized every possible way to eliminate the Native Americans and their culture. Sherman Alexie described his culture minutely through this book. He informed about the role of women and the respect they were given in the Native American Culture. They had the same respect and love for every natural being which was present on their land. Alexie used a variety of symbols in this work which add to the overall meaning of the text. These are really important and help Alexie to convey his message to his readers.

Roland Barthes is a renowned name in semiotics. In his work, *Mythologies* he gives his view of the use of symbols in a literary work. He is mainly concerned with the hidden social and ideological meanings of the objects, events and cultural aspects in a literary work. Barthes states that although the symbols are universal and their meanings can only be determined

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

through the respective reader and the authors intentions should be avoided while interpreting a work. There is only one factor which gives meanings to these symbols and that is culture. Barthes argues, "the symbols are not fixed, but rather constructed through a process of cultural myth making" (1979, p.). A theory counter to Barthes *Death of the Author*, provides a lens to analyze symbolism in *The Summer of Black Widows* and unveil multiple layers of meanings, hidden within this work. The knotty interplay of symbols, culture and meaning, could be unraveled in counter to Roland Barthes' theory of Death of Author.

Literature Review

The Summer of Black Widows has been explored by researchers through different lenses. This work unveils the exploitation, cultural disintegration and genocide of the Native Americans. David N. Cremean interprets this work with certain limitations. Although he is right when he says that the Native American writers molded their tragic history into art but this art was not only for the sake of art but their art has a purpose. Sherman Alexie and other Native American writers used their art to show the world, how they were exploited, marginalized and killed through every possible way. For Alexie, Poetry was a tool to show his anger, ignited by imagination and the imagination was the only source of survival. Alexie's definition of poetry parallels the survival of the Native Americans, "Survival = Anger × Imagination: Poetry = Anger × Imagination; and therefore, Survival = Poetry' (Berglund, 2010 as cited in Murtaza et al, n.d). This work not only contains themes of survival, death and identity but also the themes like resilience, hatred, equality, genocide, ecocide and animal symbolism (Cremean, 1997). Robert L Berner rightly says about *The Summer of Black Widows* that it is a collection of poems which unravels the horrors committed by Euro-Americans against the Native Americans. Their villages were destroyed, their lands were snatched, horrible acts of genocide and ecocide were practiced and at reservations they were treated worse than the animals. He links the loss of salmon to the Native American mothers whose sons were used by Euro-Americans for collection of gold and never came back in, '[that] Place Where Ghosts of Salmon Jump'. One alluring fact about salmon is that it swims against the flow of water which could also be interpreted as the resilience of Native American writers against the main stream American Literature. Sherman Alexie's poems fulfil his aim of showing Native Americans marginalization and genocide (Berner, 1997). Nancy J Peterson presents a comprehensive image of Sherman Alexie's literary odyssey, capturing his thematic inquiry, stylistic evolution and impacts of other cultures. He concluded that Alexie only talked about the complex issues of tribal identity. But when one reads *The Summer of Black Widows,* he learns that this work not only brings forth the issue of tribal identity but also mentions the problems which Native Americans and their land had to face because of the Euro-Americans, and the symbolic importance of the animals and other objects in Native American culture (Peterson, 2010). According to Murtaza, Bhatti, and Rose (2019) the attitude of a community towards its environment is of a great importance. Every community has its own perception and beliefs about their environment. The Euro-Americans believe in such a chain of existence which places environment at the bottom and it justifies for them that they can use each and everything of the environment for their personal gains; they can hunt, they can cut trees, they can build dams etc. The Native Americans have a different attitude towards their environment; they believe in horizontality of being. For them all things are equal and deserve equal respect. They don't cause damage to their environment; to them animals are four legged humans and plants are their helpers. The colonizers observed that the Native Americans were dependent on their environment for their physical and cultural survival and that's why they started breaching the Native American environment. They killed 5.4 million buffaloes in three years and eleven thousand porcupines. Sherman Alexie's stands as an environmental racist and lashes on the colonizers for disturbing his ecological balance (Murtaza, et al, 2019, p. 46-51).

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

The above mentioned literature review points out a gap that this work has not been looked through the lens of Symbolism. This paper answers the questions like, which symbols are present in the work and how Sherman Alexie has used these symbols to disclose the inhuman treatment of the native American people, their culture and environment. Therefore, this article studies *The Summer of Black Widows* through Roland Barthes theory of Semiotics to emphasize that an author cannot be excluded while interpreting a text.

Theoretical Framework

Roland Barthes was an essayist, philosopher, critic and a literary theorist. He is widely known for his contributions in semiotics. His writings in semiotics, paved way for Structuralism and the New Criticism. The symbols are mostly interpreted as per the knowledge of the reader. As the readers belong to different cultures, so they interpret the symbols according to their own culture and miss the point which author wants to convey. When the author wants to convey a hidden meaning, he uses different techniques. Symbolism is also one of those techniques which coveys a deep meaning. Barthes suggests that before interpreting a symbol, one should know that how does a symbol gets meaning? According to him, the symbols get meaning through cultural myth making. Every culture attaches some meanings to different symbols. So, in order to interpret the symbol, the reader should know the cultural context of the book in which that text is written. Barthes believed that symbols are a tool through which a community speaks. These are also a form of language which covey, emotions, feelings, believes and anger of a society. If one wants to uncover, the covered layers of meanings in a text, he would have to decipher the symbols. The symbols are ideological constructs, which give birth to cultural narratives.

Statement of the Problem

This paper is aimed to unravel the threads of symbolism and counter Barthes theory, 'Death of the Author' through Sherman Alexie's work, *The Summer of Black Widows.*

Objectives

- To know about the symbols which present in *The Summer of Black Widows.*
- To decipher the meanings of these symbols from Native American Culture.
- To counter Roland Barthes theory, "Death of the Author'

Significance of the Study

The research article will enrich the knowledge of the readers who are keenly interested in Native American Culture. They will know, Alexie's tactics of dealing with Occident discourse and construction of Native American discourse through symbols. This paper will inform them about the importance of symbols in Native American Culture, which are present in the respective book. The paper will be proved a useful addition in the existing academia.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

As far as the scope of this paper is concerned, this research provides information about Alexie's use of cultural symbolism to deconstruct and oppose the western discourse which painted the Native Americans as savages, uncivilized and barbarians. The study is limited to interpretation of symbols through Barthes' theory of symbolism and how these symbols fulfill Alexie's aim which in another way is the importance of an author while interpreting a text.

Discussion and Analysis

Symbolism is one of the key tools used by the authors to convey complex ideas and feelings in their works. It helps them to say what they want to in a safe way. They use it as a weapon to propagate their ideas and views. All the allegorical writings are symbolist because it is the wise use of symbolism with which authors convey their views to their readers. Thomas Stern Eliot is a dominating figure in modern literature who widely used this technique in his works. He states, "[the] poet's mind is a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

new compound are present together."(Eliot, 1920). This view of Eliot favors the idea that symbols play a key role in constructing the overall meaning of a text. Symbols have transformative power. But there are different views about this transformation of ideas. Some of the authors are of the view that symbols are universal and for their interpretation the reader should not consider the author's intentions and those symbols should also not be interpreted through the cultural context. The above mentioned theorist, Roland Barthes has also the same point of view. He wrote an essay titled as *The Death of Author*, in which he preached his philosophy of interpretation of a literary text that a text is autonomous and it should not be looked through authorial intentions. His theory demands the metaphorical death of the author as he says, "[the] birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, 1967). He actually wanted the readers to interpret a work according to their own perceptions, without being bound to specific lens. His theory of symbolism rejects subjectivity and authorial intent behind meaning. But his theory is not the law which can't be challenged and hence this critical analysis of symbolism used in *The Summer of Black Widows* by Sherman Alexie calls into question the metaphoric death of the author and objectivity of symbolic interpretation. Sherman Alexie is the spokesperson of the Native Americans, who brought into light the darkness of oppression, genocide and ecocide by European tyrants. He uses various symbols to convey his message. He used these symbols with an intent, and if a reader reads his work through Barthes theory of symbolism then he will never be able to get the intended message. Alexie used his art as a weapon to yield at his opponents, who destroyed his tribe, his culture and his ecology. His poetry cannot be understood through Barthes perspective of symbolism because it universalizes the symbols.

The Summer of Black Widows is beacon of truth which sheds light on the horrors of the colonizers and shows rich native culture. In this book Sherman Alexie has used various symbols which play a key role in construction of meaning and delivering the message to the world that how they were treated by the inhuman evils, the so called civilized colonizers. This book opens with a poem titled as, "*After the First Lighting"* in which he uses the symbol of hair. The poem is about two lovers who are sitting on a hill above the reservation. The lover gets permission from his beloved about weaving a story from the hair. Hair are of great symbolic importance in the Native American culture. These are symbol of strength, courage, identity and a link with the nature. The poem reads, "I will ask your permission to weave a story from your hair" (Alexie, 1996, p.11). After colonizing an area, the colonizers attack the identity of the colonized. The Europeans did same to the Native Americans, they asked them to get education, learn English and Christianity to become civilized. They had levelled some conditions for getting education as well. They asked the native children to get their hair cut. In "A Twelve-Step Treatment Program" the protagonist is asked by the school authorities, "discard your cultural baggage and concentrate on your future" (1993, p. 33 as cited in Murtaza et all, p. 8). They were not only asking him to cut his hair, but throw away his culture and become like Europeans who are civilized. Through this symbol of hair, Alexie has shown the elimination of Native American Culture. In another poem, "The First and Last Ghost Dance of Lester Falls Apart" Alexie protests with the symbol of a buffalo. In Native American culture, buffalo is a symbol of survival and sustenance as it provides the Native Americans with meat, milk and bones. Before the arrival of the colonizers, buffalos were in large numbers in America because the natives had great respect for them and did not kill them. But when the Europeans came, they saw that these buffalos were a source of survival for the native Americans so they started killing them. Approximately fifteen lac buffalos were killed at North Dakota which altered the ecosystem and also created problems of food for the natives. It was an indirect attack on the natives, as killing buffalos would lessen the food for the natives. The narrator says, "[from] behind a symbolic chain link fence, the buffalo stared intelligently at the white visitors

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

who soon became very nervous" (Alexie, 1996, p. 18). Buffalo is not only an animal but a resisting force which is staring and questioning the Europeans about the genocide and the ecocide, but they are hiding and running away as they don't have answers to defend their doings. In "That Place Where the Ghosts of Salmon Jump" Alexie has used three symbols to strengthen his argument Coyote, Salmon and Fall. The coyote is symbolic for oral stories, the folktales. Alexie writes,

"So Coyote rose up with his powerful and senseless magic
and smashed a paw across the water, which broke the river bottom
in two, which created rain that lasted for forty days and nights,
which created Spokane Falls, that place where salmon travelled"
(p. 19)

Every culture has local stories and myths like the Greeks who have myths about their gods, Christians have myths about the fall of man and Hindus have Mahabharat. Similarly, the Native Americans also have their myths, which refer to their oral literature, orature. Theses myths become the part of belief system for their followers but the problem lies with the outsiders who take these myths as superstitions. The Europeans also did the same, they labelled the native tales as superstitions and forcefully implemented their belief system on them. They told them their religious stories of the Fall of Adam, Resurrection of the Christ and Fall of the Mankind from the Garden of Eden but in *The Summer of Black Widows* through the above symbols Sherman Alexie makes them silent by stating that their stories of fall are concerned with the gods and not the humans, this is the actual fall. The moral degradation of Europeans is the fall, where they have killed millions of the animals, and thousands of the children. This is the fall which is worth mentioning. The narrator says, "[these] Falls are the place, where ghosts of salmon jump, where the ghosts of women mourn their children who will never find their way back home" (p. 19). The native American tribes camped on the edge of Spokane River. They used to catch the salmon, but at the time when it had laid eggs. So they cared for the ecocide and were not harming and disturbing the ecosystem. But when the Europeans built dams on the Spokane river, the salmon died at a large scale without laying eggs. It was horrible act of genocide. Similarly, when the Europeans came in America in 1492, they captured children and asked them to collect the gold. They assigned them to come up with a fixed quality of gold every three month and when they failed they were killed. They separated men and women and made them work like animals. They were allowed to meet once in a year and at that time they were exhausted because of overwork and hence were not able to mate. The women used to kill their children because they were not able to feed them. Sherman Alexie highlights this fall through the symbols of coyote and salmon. In another poem, "Why We Play Basket Ball" Sherman Alexie points about a difference between the Native American and European cultures. The whole European culture propagates the individualism. They are only concerned with their personal gains, for them only the end justifies the mean through hook or crook but the Native American culture promotes universality. In native American culture a tribe is important, not only a single individual. In her novel Sylvia Plath says, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am." (Plath, 1963, p. 105). Their whole civilization is placing I at the center, while Sherman Alexie is singing the, "Song of Ourself" (Alexie, 1996, p. 20) which binds the natives all together.

In, "Grandmother, Porcupine, Traffic" Sherman Alexie unravels the ecocide and genocide which was committed in the name of progress in the colonized world. The Europeans claim that before their arrival, the Africans, Indians and Americans were primitive and uncivilized. They gave them education, improved their standard of living, built infrastructure and made a way for their progress. Although they built infrastructure and brought railway engines in the colonized areas but they were fulfilling their own needs. They needed machinery

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

to transport raw material from colonized areas to England and that is why they made railway tracks. These tracks were made by the hard work of the natives, when these were made the Europeans looted the colonies and also started human trafficking. They captured people from colonies and sold in the markets of Europe. The roads they made and the machinery they brought, it had drastic effects on the ecosystem. The jungles were cut for road, which resulted in loss of habitats of the animals. This poem of Sherman Alexie is about the porcupine which was crossing the road and was hit by a car and consequently expired. The opening line of the poem is, "[when] Big Mom saw porcupine dead in the middle of any road, she ordered the car stopped. The road filled with slowed cars. The porcupine full of blood, stopped and cold" (p. 31). In Native culture porcupine is symbol of self-defense because its body is covered with the sharp quills. Porcupine is also a source of food for the native Americans as they feed on it in the winter season when no hunting was available for them. The porcupine with which we are introduced is dead but the grandmother is still hopeful of the porcupine. The porcupine here symbolizes the Native Americans and the grandmother is symbolic for Sherman Alexie who is still expecting the left Native tribes to regain their past glory and stand for their rights. The death of porcupines could also be interpreted as another indirect way of killing natives by eliminating their source of food. In *The Summer of Black Widows,* a poem, "Drum as love, Fear, and Prayer" opens with these lines, "Drums make everyone feel like an Indian, I have more faith in drums than I have in people who play them, I told her and she said God is the smallest drum" (p. 69-70). In this poem drum is symbolic for the Native American culture while the 'people' are symbolic for the natives. Sherman Alexie says that he has more faith in his culture than those were are practicing it because they have become coward and drunk. They are not willing to stand for their rights, they are not ready to get what belongs to them. In next lines, Alexie says

"and no I mean, if love can be
reduced to a cut bead
then I am not afraid.
But if that cut bead is sewn
into a moccasin or purse, if
that bead is part of a chain
built larger and larger, bread
by bead, then I am afraid"
(p. 70)

In Native American culture beads also have symbolic role as these stand for a specific dance, The Pow-Wo dance. Those who perform this dance they wear a specific dress named as Regelia, decorated with beads. Alexie says that using beads for such rituals is sacred but when beads are used for decorating purse it becomes commodity which is not acceptable. The things which were taken as sacred in Native American culture, the Europeans made them for sale, in other words they were humiliating the native rituals and traditions. In "Airplane" Alexie mocks the European development and their ways of portraying Natives as uncivilized and barbaric. He says, "I carry the small and usual things for safety: generic novel, movie magazine, book of poems by the latest great poet, bottle of water, and faith" (p. 81). The narrator is travelling on Airplane and states that being a native American he was never meant to be there, but anyhow he is there he is carrying the fore mentioned things with himself for safety. The Hollywood helped Euro-Americans a lot in depicting the natives as uncivilized and barbaric. He is carrying a bottle of water, signifying that once they had rivers in their control but now they are limited only to a bottle of water. This depiction shows that how Europeans snatched water, land and other resources of sustenance from the Native Americans. In "Sasquatch Poems" Alexie logically rejected the Euro-American theories which propagated the idea that red Indians were

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.04 No.01 (2026)

not original inhabitants of America they came from Russia. Alexie says, "Sasquatch did not drop the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sasquatch did not walk across the Bering Start" (p. 109). Sasquatch is symbolic for Native Americans and Alexie is rebuking the Europeans that the natives are original inhabitants of America and they are more civilized than the self-proclaimed civilizer.

The above discussion shows the importance of the authorial intensions while interpreting a text. It also supports the argument that not all the symbols are universal, symbols are particular to a culture and these can only be accurately interpreted if one has the knowledge of that culture. If the reader is unaware of Sherman Alexie's personality and the Native American culture, he will not be able decode these symbols and hence the purpose of writing the poems will not be completed.

Conclusion

Symbolism is one of the mostly used literary technique through which an author conveys his message in an abstract form. It facilities him in evoking the emotions of the readers. There are different theories regarding the interpretation of these symbols. Some of these theories favor the universality of symbolic meanings but some limit it to the specific context. As formalist interpretation of the symbols is only focused on the intrinsic meaning of the symbols in the text, structuralism interprets symbols in their relation to the overall structure of the narrative and the psychoanalysis interprets symbols as the manifestations of the hidden desires.

This research is carried out in counter to Roland Barthes theory of symbolism in which he favored the idea that symbols are universal and their interpretation should not be made on authorial interpretations. In the above discussion I have argued that a reader cannot interpret symbols used in Sherman Alexie's work, *The Summer of Black Windows*. In order to understand these poems, one has to be aware of Alexie's personality and his culture to which he belongs. Only then one becomes able to interpret symbols, which have been used in *The Summer of Black Widows.*

Sherman Alexie used symbols like hair, buffalo, salamon, falls, basketball, porcupine, drum, pow-wow dance, airplane and Sasquatch to counter the Euro-American discourse which portrays the Native Americans as uncouth, savages, wild, primitive and brutish. Through the use of these symbols Alexie has manifested that how native Americans, their culture and ecology were annihilated by the colonizers. This paper also supports the idea that in order to interpret a text, context and authorial intentions are as important as the text itself. So the Barthes idea of metaphorical death of an author does not hold its position. A text is an author's child, its legitimacy is questionable without considering authorial intentions.

References

Alexie, S. (1996). *The summer of black widows*. Hanging Loose Press.

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)

Berner, R. L. (1997). The summer of black widows. *World Literature Today, 71*(2), 430–431.

Cremean, D. N. (1997). Review of the book *The summer of black widows*, by Sherman Alexie. *Western American Literature, 32*(2), 182. https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1997.0070

Murtaza, G., Bhatti, S. A., & Rose, S. (2019). Sherman Alexie's environmental racism in *The summer of black widows*. *Global Language Review, 4*(1), 46–51. https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2019(IV-I).06

Murtaza, G., Bhatti, S. A., & Shafiq, Q. (n.d.). Eating with more sense than taste. *Erevna: Journal of Linguistics and Literature, 4*(2), 75.

Murtaza, G., & Bhatti, S. A. (2016). Sherman Alexie's discursive reconstruction of the Native American subject. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry, 14*(1), 31–47.

Peterson, N. J. (2010). The poetics of tribalism in Sherman Alexie's *The summer of black widows*. In J. Berglund & J. Roush (Eds.), *Sherman Alexie: A collection of essays* (pp. 134–158). University of Utah Press.