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INTERRACIAL INTIMACY IN NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION: A STUDY OF ALEXIE SHERMAN'S *RESERVATION BLUES*

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ABSTRACT

Interracial relationships are the consequences of mutual exchanges between races. They appear as one of the dominant issues that prevails in contemporary Native American literature. While exploring this theme, Native American authors like Alexie Sherman try to bring white people and Indians close together, as the racial mixing brought about by the contact between the two races seems to be irreversible in a society in constant change. This article seeks to delineate how the relationships between people from different racial backgrounds in *Reservation Blues* contribute to establishing a climate of peace, a guarantee for harmony between Whites and Native Americans, the first inhabitants of the American soil. The concept of cosmopolitanism according to Appiah Kwame (2006) which regards all the people of the earth as a single family and blurs artificial bordering of races, is presented as the scientific channel for the illustration of the foregoing postulate.

Key words: Interracial – Native Americans – Whites – Peace – Native American Literature

RESUME

Les rapports interraciaux qui sont la résultante de la globalisation apparaissent comme l'une des questions principales qui prévaut dans la littérature amérindienne contemporaine. En explorant ce thème, les auteurs amérindiens de la nouvelle génération, à l'instar d'Alexie Sherman, tentent de faire un rapprochement entre la race blanche et les amérindiens, car le métissage racial provoqué par la rencontre entre les deux races s'avère irrévocable dans un monde en mutation. Cet article vise à montrer comment les relations entre les personnes de races différentes dans *Reservation Blues* contribuent à établir un climat de paix, gage de stabilité entre les blancs et les Amérindiens. Le postcolonialisme à travers le concept du cosmopolitisme se présente comme le canal scientifique de l'illustration du postulat sus-édité.

Mots-clés: Interracial – Amérindiens - Blancs - Paix – Littérature Amérindienne

INTRODUCTION

During colonization, on the account of the racial discrimination that served the white folk, interracial intimacy were very uncommon and regarded as improper or against the normal order of things. As Marwan Kraidy (2005) argues : “racial theorists elevated white Europeans to the top of the hierarchy, but (...) blacks Africans to the bottom of the hierarchy, which they shared with Native Americans” (p. 48). Indeed, these kinds of relationships were forbidden due to the preservation of white race purity. For white people, racial mixing is a factor of degeneration of the white race regarded as the sane and superior one. By the same token, the discriminated Native Americans became involved in that demands people to get married on the account of the distinction based on skin color. They literally scorned white people and belittled offspring from interracial couples. This rendered integration and intercultural exchange almost difficult in the American society. Thus, this can lead to exclusion from which the world cannot take advantage of. This situation raises a certain number of questions. First, how does Sherman's characters transcend the logic of racial barriers in sexual contacts? Secondly, to what

extent is the blurring of racial differences beneficial and likely to open doors to integration, solidarity and racial collaboration ?

In the works of contemporary Native American writers like James Welch, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Silko, the tendency to get rid of mutual suspicion and violence that have marked the past is quite perceptible. Even though the encounter between Native Americans and European settlers seriously challenged the Indians' original lifestyle based on their tradition, these authors mentioned earlier are promoting the possibility to interact positively with the former oppressor. In this respect, Alexie Sherman's novels insist on miscegenation. In his project of debunking the false argument according to which there are boundaries between the two distinct races, Sherman emphasizes freely sexual intimacy Native American characters experience with their alleged superior ones.

This article purports to deconstruct the racial discourse according to which interracial couples are "potentially damning scandal" (L. Owens, 1992, p. 222). Actually the point to be made is that interracial intimacy overthrow and contradict the discourse of white supremacy and set out a new social order. More specifically, the reflexion is theoretically based on postcolonialism through the concept of cosmopolitanism to demonstrate that the unification of people from different races supports the human project of living together. As Appiah Kwame Anthony (2006) argues : "cosmopolitanism [...] regards all the people of the earth as so many branches of a single family"(p.xiii), meaning that cosmopolitanism lays emphasis on mixtures of values and cultures of all times and peoples. The first section of the present project scrutinizes hostile attitudes people have towards interracial relationships. The second section discusses the ineffectiveness of disagreements that arises when two people from different races are engaged in a love affair, while the third argues these interracial unions are the embodiment of the possibility of understanding between White people and Native Americans.

1. ANTAGONISTIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTERRACIAL INTIMACY

An interracial intimacy can be defined as a consent relationship between two people from different races. It involves romantic, emotional or sexual relationships, encompassing social acceptance. And these people can be from different or same sex. In almost all interracial relationships, some disagreements may be expressed by family members or friends from both sides. These antagonistic positions are likely to impede such relationships. Then, due to these conflictual attitudes, many people are found trapped in their will to be engaged in interracial dating. This reality that forbids relationships between people from different races originates

from the Anti-miscegenation laws that enforce racial segregation at the level of marriage and intimate relationships by criminalizing sex between members of different races.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie Sherman portrays people's discriminatory attitudes by showing that they promote division and hatred. For instance, because her parents disagree with her relationship with an Indian, Lynn breaks her relationship with a full-blood Indian by claiming this : "I can't marry you (...) You're Indian" (*RB*, p. 240). As a matter of fact, "Lynn's parents wouldn't even talk to him when they came to campus for visits" (*RB*, 240). This clearly shows the antagonistic attitudes of her parents toward that interracial union. In addition, Alexie Sherman depicts Chess and Thomas as symbols of same race relationships instigators, and individuals involved in propagating opposition for love across races. By putting those questions : "Why did you love him (...) why did you conceive him a son ?" (*RB*, p. 283), and uttering this : "I never dated no white women" (*RB*, p. 81). Chess deepens the gap between both races, recalling monoculturalism and ethnocentrism which are two concepts diametrically opposed to cosmopolitanism.

Furthermore, Chess's dividing or oppositional view is illustrated by the narrator in this excerpt: "She hated Indian men who chased after white women, she hated white women who chased after Indian men" (*RB*, p. 81). For her, "as traditional as it sounds, Indian men need Indian women, and only Indian women can take care of Indian men". This idea reveals the ambition of this character to isolate her peers from white people and even other races. She urges Native Americans wherever they are, to systematically reject interracial unions that enlarge the Native community to mixed-race or people who have parents or ancestors from different racial or ethnic groups. This corroborates Bennett Milton's view when he claims that "our initial response to difference is usually to avoid it" (2013, p.4) meaning differences whether racial or not are always perceived by human beings as a potential for misunderstanding and friction. Thus, differences of all kinds are sometimes discouraged by people around the world. They seem to overlook that "the real crux of creating a climate of respect for diversity is demonstrating understanding of the different beliefs, behaviors, and values of varying subjective cultures." (Bennett, 2013, p. 127)

Like in *Reservation Blues*, James Welch in *Heart Song of Charging Elk* (2000) deals with antagonistic attitudes towards biracial couples. In fact, the main character and his future white wife are facing the disapproval of the woman's father. He strongly disapproves of their union by declaring this : "this is a savage man" (Welch, 2020, p.395). This reaction illustrates what Bennett (2013) calls denial of racial difference. This is the state in which one's own race is experienced as the only real one. Other races are either not noticed at all, or they are construed

in rather vague ways. As a result, racial difference is either not experienced at all, or it is experienced as associated with a kind of undifferentiated other such as foreigner or immigrant. In extreme cases, the people of one's own race may be perceived to be the only real humans and other people viewed as simpler forms in the environment to be exploited, blamed or eliminated.

Another argument that constitutes an impediment to biracial unions in *Reservation Blues* is the bad treatment that children from these relationships undergo. They are treated less than human being in their communities. For characters like Chess, “children of mixed-blood marriages” (RB, p. 82) are less valuable and prone to difficulties, so she declares this to a white woman who dates a Native American : “your son will be beaten because he's a half-breed (...) No matter what he does, he'll never be Indian enough. Other Indians won't accept him. Indians are like that” (RB, p. 283). As mentioned in this quote, mulattos are victims of ill-treatment and confined in a marginal position. They are neither accepted by Whites nor by Native Americans. As a matter of fact, people who reject or scorn mixedblood offsprings react like counter-cosmopolitans who strongly believe that “there is one right way for all human being to live” (Appiah, 2006, p. xix) and that marriages with people from different races could lead their communities astray.

The rejection of mixedbloods is also perceived in *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko, In that Native American novel, the mixedblood Tayo is victim of exclusion on the basis of his mixedbloodness. His aunt wants him “to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them” (Silko 1997, p. 61-62). She literally scorns and belittles him because he is not ‘pure blood’ and therefore represents a shame for his community. For instance, she doesn't want her son Rocky, a full blood indian to relate with his cousin Tayo, for the simple fact that he is the fruit of love between people from two distinct races. So, when people refer to them as brothers, she vividly refuses with a tone which recalls her anger toward Tayo and Laura, his deceased mother as the following passage attests:

They're not brothers [...] that's Laura's boy. You know the one. She had a way of saying it, a tone of voice which bitterly told the story, and the disgrace she and the family had suffered. The things Laura had done weren't easily forgotten by the people, but she could maintain a distance between Rocky, who was her pride and, this other, unwanted child. If nobody else ever knew about this distance, she and Tayo did. (Silko, p. 65)

Tayo's exclusion due to his status of mixedblood is eloquently detailed by the Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen (1986):

Tayo's suffering is caused by his status as a half-breed in a tribe that does not approve of mixedblood (...) because he was a breed, Tayo was not taught Laguna traditions and did not share the arcane knowledge of his Laguna people. He was treated as an outsider, mocked

for his green eyes. Auntie watched him carefully, always remembering the circumstances of his birth and his low status because of his white father, reminding him through her actions how alien he was. (Allen (1986, p. 140)

This rejection of difference from Auntie recalls ethnocentrism, “this tendency to see our own culture as the center of the universe [which] affects [...] interethnic relations” (Bennett 2013 : 209). Indisputably, the conception of marginalizing or excluding the Other’s existence is limited way of thinking. As a matter of fact, “today relatively few people are surrounded by neighbors who are the replicas of themselves” (Bennett, p. 281) This means that the future belongs to mixture of all sorts. As such, mixedblood individuals who are the embodiment of racial mixture should constitute a pride and an asset for our world, because they are the living manifestations that cohabitation between races is possible.

However, the criticism and opposition against interracial intimacy and mixedbloods are not always promoted by all characters. Some of them are in favor of racial intermixing. That is the reason why relationships based on racial criteria appears to be weakened and ineffective.

2. RACE FREE RELATIONSHIPS: A CELEBRATION OF BIRACIALITY

With the current context of the world in which “we are forced into a quantum leap from the mutual suspicion and hostility that have marked the past relationships between peoples into a world in which mutual respect and comprehension are requisite” (Bennett 2013, p. 283), there is nothing improper about dating interracially. Thanks to migration and new tools of communication like the internet, the world has turned into a big village with no barriers to cross between people from different origins. As a consequence, interactions among the various races become easier, and sometimes they bring about interracial marriages everywhere in the world. Put differently, relationships irrespective of racial preconceptions are prosperous. This reality is acknowledged by Jan Nederveen Pieterse(2020) when he gives us an idea of what is going on in the United States, a country where racial blending seems to be an irreversible trend. He affirms:

In the United States, demographers speak of a silent explosion in the number of mixed-race people. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of interracial couples went from 150,000 to more than 1.1 million, and the number of interracial children leaps accordingly. Since 1970, the number of mixed-race children in the United States has quadrupled. And there are six times as many interracial marriages today as there were in 1960. (Pieterse 2020, p. 131)

It can be noticed the dwindling of non-raciality and the sharp and exponential increase of multiraciality in North America. Put simply, it shows that in the US, the communities are becoming more and more interracial. It is difficult to see children with no biracial origin. Hence, the sentences ‘the number of mixed-race children (...) has quadrupled’ and ‘there are six times’.

Alexie Sherman in *Reservation Blues* explores interracial relationships as a celebration of victory over racism in the Native American context. In fact, in a multiracial society, marriages or sexual intercourses should not favor categorization. Indeed, Father Arnold, the priest of the Indian reservation has sex with a young Native American girl name Checkers. As a westerner living on the reservation, Father Arnold could be suspected of minimization and denial of the Indian race, but Sherman depicts him as an individual capable of transcending racial barriers. His status as a white priest does not impede him from dating Checkers, whom he finds irresistibly beautiful. To declare his love, he tells her this: “ you’re such a pretty girl (...) you know I love you” (*RB*, p. 155). In return, Checkers is also in love with him as she declares : ‘I went to see Father Arnold today and I think I fell in love’” (*RB*, p. 148). These words show that love between two people from distinct races is possible. The following passage in which their sexual intercourse is depicted, is enlightening :

Father dropped his robe to the floor. Naked, Checkers studied him. His penis was huge (...) Checkers patted the sheet beside her, and Father lay down close to her. She felt his heat, smell. He smelled like smoke and communion wine (...) Checkers felt his penis brush against her thigh. It was so big she knew it would hurt her. Father touched her breasts, squeezed her nipples, moved his down her stomach (...) Father kissed Checkers gently, flicked his tongue between her teeth (*RB*, pp. 155-156)

This sequence of the stories shows that the white priest has sexual intercourse with a young Native American. The words ‘naked’, ‘penis’, ‘breast’, ‘nipples’ are words related to sexual contact. Through this interracial sex, Sherman is blurring three binaries : White / non-White, Christian/non-Christian, and foreigner/autochtone recalling Appiah’s concept of cosmopolitanism which stipulates that “ human variety matters because people are entitled to the options they need to shape their lives in partnerships with others” (Appiah, 2006, p. 104)

Like Father Arnold and Checkers, who defy racial barriers in love affairs, two other white women named Betty and Veronica have intimate relationships with two Native American men as reported by the narrator : “ Betty shared a bed with Junior and Veronica with Victor” (*RB*, p. 42). The fact that Sherman depicts a white man chasing after a Native American girl, and a Native American man dating a white woman, sheds light on his will to prove that in today’s multicultural context, antagonistic attitudes towards interracial unions are no longer tenable, and need to be denounced or combated by people around the world. Therefore, for Sherman, “people should celebrate love whether it’s found, since it is so rare” (*RB*, p. 42). This appeal can be perceived as a plea for interconnedness between people, whatever their races, in a world that has long been divided by racist ideologies.

If couples from two dissimilar races can be successful, the descendants or the fruits of this kind of union cannot be regarded as “unwanted chil[dren] born from (...) ignominious interracial union[s]” (Koné, 2020, p. 240). Instead, they should be treated with respect and consideration. In other words, mixedblood individuals who are the embodiment of racial mixture should constitute a pride and an asset for our world, because they are the living manifestations that cohabitation between races is possible, and they can speak for both world. Taking our cue from the advantageous effects of the breaking of barriers between races through relationships, we can deduce that mutual understanding can be attained through them.

3. INTERRACIAL UNIONS: A WAY TO MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

According to Bennett, we can reach mutual understanding between different races when “we try to comprehend thoughts and feelings from the worldview of the other”, instead of assuming “our own culture or way of life as the most natural” (Bennett, 2013, p 282). Father Arnold’s relationship with a Native American girl helps to bridge the gap between him and the local inhabitants. He seems to grasp that “our world is transformed, our neighbours increasingly will be people whose lifestyles contrast sharply with our own” (Bennett, p. 282). As an illustration, he demonstrates his will to draw close to his parishioners by playing basketball in a tournament organized on the reservation. As the local press reports:

Father Arnold scored 33 points Tuesday night, including the game-winning free throws with no time left on the clock, to lead the Catholic Church to a thrilling come-from-behind 111-110 win over the Assembly of God in the championship game of the Spokane Indian Christian Basketball Tournament. (p. 93)

In other words, the priest bridges the gap between him and the other people on the reservation. He does not make a difference between the local inhabitants and himself. For this reason, he does not oblige his church members to do harsh activities ; instead, he does it himself, showing his humility. For instance, “he cleaned the graves of five generations of Spokane Indian Catholics” (*RB*, p. 191). For him, the gospel should be taught through love, not violence. As he argues, “we should teach through love” (*RB*, p. 165). As a result of his propensity to live harmoniously with other people, recalling a cosmopolitan mindset, life on the reservation seems peaceful.

Father Arnold also unveils another side of white Catholic priests. Indeed, contrary to some priests who illustrate themselves as “disrespectful of foreign culture and beliefs” (Lysik 2017, p. 155) and ban or prohibit tribal religious practices as was the case with the arrival of the colonizers, Father Arnold “redeems the church considerably” (Owens, 1992, pp. 204-205). That is to say, he gives a positive image of the Christian religion which is accused of being a source of Native Americans’ assimilation and loss of culture.

Indeed, Father Arnold is depicted as a tolerant priest in terms of religious practice because he shows real cross-religious exchange while preaching in the reservation. As a matter of fact, he never shows hostility against people from the Indian culture. Therefore, he is regarded as “a good white man” (RB, p. 179). For instance, he accepts a dreamcatcher decorated with rosary beads from the oldest Spokane Indian on the reservation. If “other priests would have dismissed it as a Indian mysticism or mythological arts and crafts” (RB, p. 250), the tolerant “Father Arnold had rushed home and hang it over his bed” (RB, p. 250) This action can be construed as his intention to establish dialogue between the belief systems, thereby the two communities.

He also finds it normal to work harmoniously with Big Mom, the symbol of Spokanes religion on the reservation. It does not matter if Big Mom is not a Catholic, but they “make a great team” (RB, p. 280). Indeed, at a burial ceremony that occurs on the reservation, Father Arrnold accepts to “cover all the Christian stuff, while Big Mom does the traditional Indian stuff” (RB, p. 280) during Mass. In this regard, they are complementing each other recalling religious hybridity which fosters harmony and cohesion. In other words, the commitment of this white priest to relate positively with Indian folks and their religion has demonstrated that “not every white person wants to kill Inians”(RB, p. 168) and that the prospect of harmony between people from different races or cultures foreshadows better days in the communities.

Father Arnold’s positive mindset recalls Father Damien in *Tracks* and *The last Report at Little No Horse* by Louise Erdrich. Even if Damien does not engage himself in any interracial relationship, both white priests share some similarities in terms of breaking self /Other dichotomy. As a matter of fact, Father Damien does not focus on the church’s insistence upon the conversion of Native Americans in his mission and does not conceive indigenous people as subaltern individuals. Rather, he is very open to the issues of Native people. He deeply cares for his parishioners and forms bonds with them. He confesses: “I am becoming one with them [...] And the closer I draw, the more of their pain do I feel” (Erdrich 2003, p. 209). Actually, Damien has an inclusive rather than an exclusive view of Christianity. It means that contrary to some priests who illustrate themselves as “disrespectful of foreign culture and beliefs” (Lysik 2017, p. 155) and ban or prohibit tribal religious practices, Damien he gives a positive image of Christian religion by communicating across religions. To reach that intercultural mindset like Father Arnold, he gets rid of two elements that impede intercultural intractions. These elements are preconceptions and the tendency to evaluate others. Like a real promoter of mutual understanding, Damien exposes himself to the people of his community so that they become less strange and unfamiliar to him.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Alexie Sherman's *Reservation Blues* bespeaks the positive aspect of relating across races. Proceeding from the promotion of race-free unions in the novel, and denouncing the instigators of ethnocentrism and the painful experiences of the mixed-blood children, the core value of the message is to shed light on a society where racism no longer remains a deeply rooted phenomenon in many people's minds. By illustrating the literary artistic strategies to express and break racism in love affairs, *Reservation Blues* highlights the blurred relationships between races, that is to say, the porous boundaries between whites and Indians. Like many other Native American writers, Alexie Sherman propels the idea of racial interbreeding as a positive project that should be praised and accepted by all communities in American society, and everywhere in the globe.

Interracial intercourses have revealed that they uphold the politics of hybridity in the novel under study. The characters' interaction with individuals from different races have shed light on the writer purpose not to choose one race over another. If racial demarcation promoted by racist ideology on account of the presumed superiority of one is at the root of some disagreements, miscegenation has shown that beyond the difference of skin color, all human beings are the same. No race is superior to another. Therefore, the disagreements manifested by racists from white and indian communities have not impeded interracial intimacies to prosper.

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