



NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *RESERVATION BLUES*

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ABSTRACT

The oral tradition of Native Americans is vital in maintaining their cultural identity, particularly in the face of the challenges posed by modernization and the long-standing impacts of colonialism that have threatened the existence of their original culture. Sherman Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* illustrates these elements of oral tradition and their functions within Native American culture. This research employs a phenomenological approach and Ruth Finnegan's oral tradition theory to analyze how the elements of oral tradition in the novel serve as tools for critique and the restoration of Spokane's cultural identity. Oral tradition is a cultural heritage from the past that needs to be preserved because, if it is not maintained and passed down to younger generations, it will simply disappear. Oral tradition serves as a means to recognize and understand the collective trauma experienced by the community at that time and to rebuild the identity of Native American society. This research concludes that the elements of oral tradition in the novel function to preserve cultural identity, reflect collective trauma, and critique the marginalization of the Spokane community. The narratives of oral tradition are also connected to Native American cultural values, revealing their struggles and resilience in the face of modernization and colonialism.

Keywords: *Oral tradition, Native American, reflection, Phenomenological approach, Reservation Blues novel*

INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition is one of the most important media for preserving intangible cultural heritage. For Native American communities, oral tradition plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity amid the pressures of colonialism and modernization. Through stories passed down from generation to generation, Native American communities preserve their history, values, and local wisdom so that they remain



alive. Oral tradition functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium of cultural education that strengthens communal bonds and solidarity.

Sherman Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* serves as an important representation of Native American oral tradition. Alexie, a Native American writer of Spokane descent, portrays how the Spokane people use storytelling and music as forms of cultural expression as well as resistance to marginalization. Through its characters and narrative structure, the novel demonstrates that oral tradition helps the Spokane community confront the social and economic challenges they experience.

Oral tradition is part of cultural heritage from the past that must be preserved because it is transmitted from one generation to the next. It is generally conveyed verbally through stories, folktales, and collective memories that live within a community. Sibarani (2015) explains that oral tradition is a cultural practice transmitted orally over a long period of time and becomes an essential part of the life of the supporting community. Therefore, oral tradition functions not only as a medium of cultural communication but also as a repository of collective values and experiences.

In practice, oral tradition serves various functions that are shaped by social context and the individuals who perform it. Oral tradition may function as a medium for transmitting cultural values, maintaining identity, and expressing social criticism. Through myths, folktales, and songs, communities transmit history and collective experience across generations. In Native American societies, oral tradition plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity, particularly in the face of colonialism and modernization that threaten the survival of Indigenous cultures (Cruishank and Shanley in Schulhoff, 2010). Through oral tradition, Native American communities remain connected to past experiences while reflecting on the meaning of life and self-identity.

In *Reservation Blues*, oral tradition is presented through narratives that combine Native American experiences with modern contexts. The use of oral tradition in the novel does not function merely as a narrative element, but also as a medium for representing and preserving the cultural values of the Spokane community. These values are conveyed through the myth of the magical guitar, the stories told by Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and the songs that appear throughout the novel.

Previous studies on *Reservation Blues* include research by Moling (2016) in his article entitled "*Anarchy on the Rez: The Blues, Popular Culture, and Survival in Sherman Alexie's Reservation Blues.*" Moling explains that blues music in the novel functions as a medium for expressing suffering, collective trauma, and Native American resistance to colonialism. He emphasizes that Alexie's adaptation of blues music becomes a form of cultural expression that contributes to the reconstruction of Native American identity, particularly through the character of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who uses music to convey the stories of his community.



In addition, Price (2016), in her article “*Sherman Alexie’s Reservation Blues: The Native American Journey Reflected in Dreams*,” examines the representation of dreams as a narrative device in the novel. Price explains that dreams are used to reflect collective trauma, spirituality, and cultural conflict experienced by the Spokane people. This study shows how Alexie employs elements of magical realism to depict the inner experiences and cultural identity journeys of Native American characters.

The study of oral tradition in literary works is important because oral tradition not only reflects cultural values but also serves as a means for marginalized communities to maintain their identity and to bridge the relationship between the past and the present (Simatupang et al., 2024). In the context of *Reservation Blues*, the study of oral tradition provides deeper insight into how Alexie represents Spokane culture through distinctive narrative elements.

This research aims to describe Native American oral traditions found in *Reservation Blues* and to explain how the elements of the magical guitar myth, the stories of Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and songs function in shaping identity and social criticism of the marginalization of the Spokane community. By analyzing these aspects, this study demonstrates that oral tradition serves as an important medium for preserving Native American cultural identity and history through literary works.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method aimed at understanding and interpreting the phenomena examined based on the research problems. The collected data are analyzed descriptively to obtain an in-depth and detailed understanding of the representation, forms, and interpretative meanings of Native American oral traditions in Sherman Alexie’s novel *Reservation Blues*.

To examine the representation of Native American oral tradition elements, this study applies a text-centered phenomenological approach. Phenomenology emphasizes that individual or communal experiences, although subjective, are shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. This approach is used to explore how perceptions, emotions, and experiences construct the meaning of a phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Phenomenology is relevant to the analysis of oral tradition in the novel because it focuses on how Native American communities understand cultural traditions, identity, and collective experience as represented through literary narratives. *Reservation Blues* is selected as the object of study because it explicitly presents oral tradition as a representation of Native American cultural values and identity. Elements such as songs, myths, and folktales in the novel contribute to the depiction of oral tradition.

The analysis begins with a comprehensive understanding of the novel’s context and the messages conveyed by the author. This contextualization is essential for interpreting how elements of oral tradition are represented in the text. The research data consist of relevant narrative excerpts that are carefully selected and



organized for analysis, ensuring that the analytical process is grounded in data aligned with the research focus.

This study applies a phenomenological approach with four stages of analysis, as outlined below.

1. **Bracketing**

This stage involves identifying elements of oral tradition that appear in the novel, such as myths, folktales, and songs. The researcher seeks to set aside personal assumptions in order to approach the text objectively and to understand the phenomenon of oral tradition as it is represented in the narrative (Greening, 2019).

2. **Intuiting**

The intuiting stage focuses on understanding the meanings embedded in the phenomenon based on the experiences presented in the text (Greening, 2019). At this stage, the researcher observes narrative patterns of oral tradition, such as repetition, cycles, and story structures, to understand how these elements convey cultural values within Native American society.

3. **Analyzing**

The analyzing stage involves an in-depth examination of the data to reveal the essential and universal themes of the phenomenon (Greening, 2019). The researcher analyzes how elements of oral tradition in the novel reflect specific cultural functions, such as identity formation, cultural preservation, and the healing of collective trauma among Native American communities.

4. **Describing**

The describing stage is the final phase of phenomenological analysis, in which the essence of the phenomenon is articulated as it is represented in the text (Greening, 2019). At this stage, elements of oral tradition are connected to the social and historical contexts of Native American communities in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of their representational meanings within the novel.

The main theoretical framework used in this research is the concept of oral tradition proposed by Ruth Finnegan. In *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* and *Oral Literature in Africa*, Finnegan explains that oral tradition refers to traditions transmitted verbally and collectively from generation to generation (Finnegan, 1992). In this study, Finnegan's concept of oral tradition is employed as an analytical tool to understand how values, collective memory, and Native American cultural identity are represented through the novel's narrative. Oral tradition may take various forms, including myths, folktales, songs, and other oral narratives that function as media for transmitting cultural values (Finnegan, 2012).

Oral tradition is closely connected to the community that owns it and represents collective ideas conveyed through individuals as storytellers. According



to Finnegan, oral tradition functions not only as an aesthetic form but also as a medium for education and the transmission of social values that reflect social structures and systems (Finnegan in Purwanti, 2022). In the context of this research, this concept is used to analyze how elements of oral tradition in *Reservation Blues* function as media for identity formation, social criticism, and the representation of collective Native American experiences.

The concept of oral tradition proposed by Ruth B. Finnegan is relevant for examining the representation of oral tradition elements, their functions, and the social contexts that influence them in the novel. To establish analytical validity, this research refers to various relevant literary sources, including books and scholarly articles, which support the analytical process and help contextualize the research findings within existing literary studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Native American oral tradition in *Reservation Blues* includes three important elements that shape the narrative meaning: the myth of the magical guitar, the stories told by Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and songs.

Myth of the Magical Guitar Analysis

Myth is a prose narrative that is considered true and sacred by the community that upholds it, and it is often connected to collective experience, belief, and spiritual practices (Bascom, 1965). In Native American cultures, myth plays an important role because it becomes a medium for transmitting history, values, and worldviews through oral tradition and ritual (Williams & Mitchell, 2004). Therefore, understanding myth is an important part of examining Native American cultural experience and identity.

In *Reservation Blues*, Robert Johnson's magical guitar is one of the most prominent mythological elements. The guitar is believed to have supernatural power that allows its owner to play music with extraordinary ability. Belief in this guitar recalls magical objects that often appear in Native American oral traditions, such as amulets or sacred objects believed to be connected to the spiritual world. In this context, the guitar does not function only as a musical instrument, but also as a modern medium for expressing experience, values, and spiritual conflict, similar to how oral tradition conveys history and the collective experience of a community. This can be seen in the following quotation.

“It’s good to meet you, Mr. Johnson. Who’s your traveling partner?”
“Johnson picked up his guitar, held it close to his body.” “My best friend,”
“Johnson said.” “But I ain’t gonna tell y’all his name. The Gentleman might hear and come runnin’. He gets into the strings, you hear?” “Thomas saw that Robert Johnson looked scared and tired, in need of a shower, a



good night's rest, and a few stories to fill his stomach.” (Alexie, 1995, p. 5)

The quotation above shows an ambivalent relationship between Robert Johnson and his guitar. The guitar is personified as a “best friend,” which indicates an emotional closeness between Johnson and the object. However, at the same time, the guitar becomes a source of fear because it is connected to the Gentleman, a supernatural figure who controls the guitar's power. This relationship reflects a mythic pattern in oral tradition, where the main character is bound to a magical object that offers power but also poses danger.

Johnson's fear and exhaustion suggest a spiritual burden caused by his attachment to the guitar. The description that Johnson looks “scared and tired, in need of a shower, a good night's rest, and a few stories to fill his stomach” reflects deep physical and emotional fatigue. This experience can be read as a reflection of the collective trauma of Native American communities that have long faced social and spiritual exploitation. From a phenomenological perspective, Johnson's condition does not only describe an individual state, but also presents a lived experience filled with historical burden and alienation.

From this quotation, it is also clear that the guitar functions as a magical object that connects Robert to the Gentleman as a supernatural or an evil force that controls the guitar. In oral tradition, myths are often accepted as truths that are taught and treated as authoritative references to explain what is considered sacred, and they are usually connected to theology and ritual (Endraswara, 2018). Myths also often involve supernatural objects or beings that have the power to change a person's fate.

Belief in objects that have spirits or spiritual power is part of a traditional worldview. One example is the Kachina dolls of the Hopi, which are believed to embody spirits with human qualities or certain natural phenomena (Lowenstein & Vitebsky, 2012). The ambivalent relationship between Robert and his guitar as a companion and as a source of fear that fits this pattern. The myth of Robert's magical guitar follows a narrative structure in which the protagonist is connected to a magical object that brings power but also threatens his life.

In the Spokane and broader Native American cultural context, the belief that certain objects contain spirits or spiritual power often functions as a symbol of protection and also danger. Therefore, the guitar in this story does not only serve as a musical instrument, but also represents struggles over identity and resistance against external control, such as colonial or capitalist power represented by the Gentleman. Johnson's dependence on the guitar reflects a spiritual dilemma that is also experienced by the Spokane people: compromising traditional values for worldly gain.

The magical guitar also functions as a symbol of external control that limits individual freedom. Johnson's dependence on the guitar reflects a spiritual dilemma, namely a compromise of inner values for worldly achievement. This



condition can be read as a reflection of the collective experience of Native American communities that face external pressure and lose control over identity and spiritual life. This is further emphasized in the following quotation.

“Mr. Builds-the-Fire, I sold my soul to the Gentleman so I could play this damn guitar better than anybody ever played guitar. I’m hopin’ Big Mom can get it back.” (Alexie, 1995, p. 8)

The quotation above shows Robert Johnson’s awareness of the consequences of selling his soul and his spiritual freedom to the Gentleman. This statement also shows Robert’s hope to correct his mistake through Big Mom’s help. This narrative pattern aligns with oral tradition, where a character who commits a spiritual violation seeks redemption through a wise figure or healer.

The phrase “selling one’s soul” is a universal metaphor for giving up something extremely valuable for worldly benefit. In Robert Johnson’s context, the soul he sells represents his spiritual freedom, sacrificed for his ambition to become the greatest guitarist. The guitar obtained through this agreement then becomes a symbol of emotional and spiritual burden that continues to bind Johnson to the deal with the Gentleman. In this way, the guitar does not function only as an instrument, but also as a lasting reminder of his spiritual compromise and a burden that is difficult to release.

On the other hand, Big Mom appears as a symbol of hope, healing, and cultural preservation. Robert’s hope that Big Mom can return his soul indicates trust in Native American traditional and spiritual power as a way to repair wrongdoing. In the Native American cultural context, this quotation stresses a warning about the danger of surrendering essential things for personal ambition, while also emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional values when facing modernization pressure (Obregon, 2014).

The agreement between Johnson and the Gentleman is described explicitly in the following quotation.

“What do you want, Mr. Johnson?” “asked the Gentleman... “I want to play the guitar better than anybody ever.” ... “What do you love the most, Mr. Johnson?” ... “Freedom,” “Johnson said.” ... “I’ll give you all I got.” “The horses screamed. The Gentleman leaned over, touched Johnson's guitar with the tip of a fingernail, and then smiled.” “It’s done,” “said the Gentleman and faded away.”” (Alexie, 1995, pp. 264–265)

This quotation shows the conflict between Robert Johnson’s desire to become the greatest guitarist and the price he must pay for that ambition. The conflict is structured narratively: the Gentleman offers a deal, Robert agrees to give up his freedom, and the Gentleman’s touch on the guitar marks the beginning of a lifelong



spiritual burden. The Gentleman's fingernail touching the guitar symbolizes an invisible contract and the supernatural power attached to the instrument.

The freedom Robert sacrifices symbolizes something extremely valuable, both individually and collectively. In the Spokane and Native American context, freedom is closely connected to land rights, spirituality, and cultural identity that were lost due to colonization. The horses' screams function as a sign of supernatural presence and as a symbol of a major change that goes beyond the human world. In oral tradition, animals are often used to mark cosmic disturbance or an important event that exceeds ordinary human life.

The theme of an agreement between a human and a supernatural being to gain extraordinary power or skill is a common motif in oral traditions. Although it does not always take the form of selling one's soul, Native American oral traditions often include stories about supernatural beings offering power or knowledge at a high price. One example is Nalusa Chito in Choctaw mythology, a being that takes the souls of individuals who violate spiritual norms (Siedlak, 2023). In the Spokane and Native American cultural context, the agreement between Robert and the Gentleman functions as a warning about the danger of sacrificing spiritual and cultural values for worldly success. The Gentleman represents an exploitative force that resonates with the historical experience of Native American communities in losing freedom, land, and spirituality under colonial pressure (Smallwood et al., 2020).

The development of the magical guitar myth reaches a peak when the guitar changes hands. This can be seen in the following quotation.

"That guitar would never let Johnson go, until he left it in Thomas Builds-the-Fire's blue van... Johnson felt free and guilty at the same time. The guitar would never let go of those Indians now. It held onto Victor even harder than it ever held Johnson." (Alexie, 1995, p. 174)

In this quotation, the plot develops through the transfer of ownership of the magical guitar. The guitar, which previously functioned as a spiritual burden for Robert Johnson, moves to the Spokane community, especially to Victor Joseph. This transfer creates a new dynamic: spiritual and emotional burdens do not end with one individual, but can be passed on to another person within the community. Johnson is described as feeling free yet guilty, which shows awareness of the negative impact of his earlier agreement. On the other hand, Victor now carries the burden, showing how a magical object can create an ongoing cycle of suffering and spiritual conflict.

In oral tradition, magical objects often become the center of stories because they bring great power along with heavy consequences. One example is the sacred pipe and tobacco in the story of *The White Buffalo Calf Woman*. In that story, White Buffalo Calf Woman appears to two Lakota hunters and gives the sacred pipe



(chanunpa) to their people, teaches how to use it in spiritual ceremonies, and provides guidance for living in harmony with nature and spirits (Williams & Mitchell, 2004). In ritual practice, the pipe and sacred tobacco function to uplift the soul and open communication between humans and the Creator, so both objects are considered sacred.

A similar idea is reflected in the guitar in *Reservation Blues*. The guitar resembles magical objects in Native American folktales: an object that can grant power but also bring a curse, depending on how it is used and passed down. The guitar symbolizes spiritual and emotional burdens that affect not only an individual, such as Robert Johnson, but also the Spokane community as a whole. When the guitar “holds” Victor more tightly than it held Johnson, it suggests that the Spokane community faces challenges greater than those borne by one individual.

In addition, in oral tradition, magical objects are often used to convey moral lessons. In this context, the guitar functions as a reminder of the danger of spiritual deals and materialism. The transfer of the guitar to Victor reflects how oral traditions often portray the inheritance of burdens or responsibilities across generations. This process also raises questions about how individuals and communities confront past trauma. The transfer of this spiritual burden reflects the condition of the Spokane community, like many Native American communities, that inherits collective trauma passed from one generation to the next (Brown-Rice, 2013). The increasingly heavy burden reflects the collective struggle of the Spokane people to maintain cultural identity under external pressure.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s Stories Analysis

Folktales or storytelling are a form of oral tradition that functions as a medium for transmitting cultural values, collective experience, and the history of a community (Finnegan, 2012). In a Native American context, storytelling does not only serve as entertainment, but also becomes a way to remember, negotiate, and preserve cultural identity threatened by colonialism and modernization. Through stories, Native American communities maintain collective memory and express lived experiences that are not always recorded in official history.

In *Reservation Blues*, the stories told by Thomas Builds-the-Fire are an important element in representing Native American oral tradition. Thomas is portrayed not only as a member of the band Coyote Springs, but also as a storyteller who consistently narrates stories about the life of the Spokane community. Through his stories, Thomas reflects collective trauma, criticizes power relations between Native Americans and the dominant society, and expresses efforts to maintain cultural identity under social and historical pressures. One important story Thomas tells relates to his father, Samuel Builds-the-Fire.

“Way back when, my father was an active alcoholic only about three months of every year... He was such a good basketball player that all the



Spokanes wanted him to be more. When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they'll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask him to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon... My father wasn't any different. After his basketball days were over, he didn't have much else. If he could've held a basketball in his arms when he cut down trees for the BIA, maybe my father would've kept that job. If he could have drank his own sweat after a basketball game and got drunk off the effort, maybe he would've stayed away from the real booze." (Alexie, 1995, pp. 97–98)

This story describes a personal experience that also represents the collective experience of the Spokane community. Through Thomas's story about his father, especially the statement, "When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus" it becomes clear that talented individuals are often burdened with high expectations from their community. These expectations position the individual as a "hero," which can also create heavy pressure.

The structure of Thomas's story reflects a traditional narrative pattern in oral tradition: it connects the main character to life challenges and a moral lesson. This story also shows an oral tradition practice in which personal experience is used to convey broader understanding about life, community, and cultural identity. In Native American oral tradition, humor is often combined with tragic elements, as seen in the expression "ask him to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon" (Garrett et al., 2005). This humor functions as an emotional balance that helps listeners face harsh realities in a lighter way (Garrett et al., 2005).

By telling his father's story, Thomas not only reflects intergenerational relations but also preserves the collective experience of the Spokane community, which faces similar pressures and challenges. In terms of cultural function, this story can be read as a critique of the community's excessive expectations toward talented individuals, which may lead to personal collapse when those expectations are not fulfilled. Samuel's loss of direction after his basketball career ends reflects colonial trauma that still shapes the Spokane community, especially when sustainable life opportunities are not available.

Beyond functioning as a warning, this story also plays a role in preserving local identity and narrative. By naming his father as the Washington State High School Basketball Player of the Year, Thomas preserves the memory of an individual achievement within the Spokane community, which can become a source of pride and inspiration. Further, through storytelling, Thomas not only delivers a moral message but also uses narrative to reflect the Spokane community's challenges while also attempting to heal his personal relationship with his father.



Thomas's stories also have functions as a medium for maintaining historical memory and collective trauma among Native Americans, as seen in the story about Wounded Knee below.

“We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee... All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted ‘Jesus Christ’ as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you're trying to sleep, when you're praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter? ... He ate you both up like he was a coyote. They all ate us like we were mice, rabbits, flightless birds. They ate us whole.” (Alexie, 1995, pp. 167–168)

The quotation above shows Thomas Builds-the-Fire's depiction of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Although Thomas did not directly experience this event, through storytelling he is able to present the collective experience of Native American massacre. In this story, violence is described as an act carried out in the name of God, when soldiers shout “Jesus Christ” while killing victims, as if the massacre receives religious justification.

Chess's reaction of crying, and Thomas's question, “Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you're trying to sleep, when you're praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter?”, show that the past does not remain only as a historical event. Instead, it continues to live in the awareness of later generations as historical trauma or collective trauma. From a phenomenological perspective, this story shows how past pain is experienced again in the body and emotions in the present, especially through prayer, memory, and spiritual guilt.

The Wounded Knee Massacre also creates inner conflict for Thomas and Chess because they must face the brutal historical reality and its impact on their spirituality. Thomas's storytelling functions as a way to resist historical forgetting. This can be seen in the metaphor of the coyote in the line “He ate you both up like he was a coyote.” In Thomas's story, the coyote symbolizes the colonizer who exploits and destroys Native American communities. The description of victims being “eaten” emphasizes how colonialism consumes Indigenous life and culture.

In Native American oral tradition, storytelling is often used to preserve community history, especially history that is not recognized or is erased from official narratives (Brave Heart et al., 2011). Oral tradition also allows individuals to identify themselves with collective experience. When Thomas says, “We were both at Wounded Knee,” he is not only speaking for himself, but also connecting himself and Chess to the wider Native American community, even though they were not physically present at that event.

This storytelling practice functions as historical reminder, a critique of colonial power and religion used to justify violence, and also as a healing process through narrative. Thomas's story becomes a medium for maintaining collective



memory of Wounded Knee as a symbol of Native American suffering and struggle under colonialism. This story also opens space for reflection and social healing. Chess's tears at the end confirm that storytelling does not only deliver narrative content, but also has deep emotional impact that allows listeners to face and process inherited pain.

Besides highlighting trauma and history, Thomas's stories also offer reflection on social relations and identity through a simple but symbolic narrative.

“A long time ago, two boys lived on a reservation. One was an Indian named Beaver, and the other was a white boy named Wally... When the white boy won contests, all the Indian boys beat him up. But Beaver never beat up on the white boy. No matter how many times he got beat up, that white boy kept dancing.” (Alexie, 1995, pp. 82–83)

The quotation above shows that Thomas's story has a traditional structure that begins with a common phrase in oral tradition: “a long time ago.” This phrase creates a mythic or symbolic narrative context, because mythic events are generally understood as happening in a distant past. For this reason, many traditional narratives begin with expressions such as “it was a very long time ago” or “this happened a long time ago” (Williams & Mitchell, 2004).

The story in this quotation is told in a simple way but contains a moral message about perseverance and relations across identities. Through Beaver and Wally, the function of oral tradition appears in conveying values such as tolerance, perseverance, and intercultural relations. Beaver can be understood as representing tolerance and sincerity, because he chooses not to join in beating Wally even though Wally is considered superior. In contrast, Wally represents persistence and courage to keep dancing and participating even after repeated violence.

Native American oral tradition often uses stories that seem simple to convey deeper meaning. Stories in Native American folktales generally do not present moral lessons directly or in a linear way. Instead, such stories often show chaos and ambiguity as part of their worldview, inviting listeners to learn through metaphysical experiences faced by the characters (Saiyed & Irwin, 2017).

In this quotation, Thomas functions as a traditional storyteller who not only tells a story but also opens a space for reflection about relations between Indigenous culture and the dominant culture. In a phenomenological context, this story shows how lived experience and intergroup relations are understood through a simple narrative that carries layered meaning. Thomas creates a reflective space about identity, difference, and cultural resilience without being didactic, so listeners are invited to understand meaning through the experiences presented in the narrative.



Songs Analysis

Songs are an important form of oral tradition because they combine language, melody, and rhythm to convey experience and cultural meaning. In oral tradition, songs can function as social commentary, emotional expression, humor, or records of experiences held by individuals or groups (Finnegan, 2012). Therefore, songs are not only entertainment, but also a medium that stores and transmits a community's collective memory.

In *Reservation Blues*, songs become an important element because the characters live within a collective experience as Native Americans on a reservation. The songs that appear in the novel reflect the realities of reservation life, efforts to process family and historical trauma, critiques of marginalization, and modern ways to preserve Native American oral tradition. One strong example appears in the lyrics of "Reservation Blues."

"Reservation Blues. Dancing all alone, feeling nothing good. It's been so long since someone understood. All I've seen is, is why I weep. And all I had for dinner was some sleep. You know I'm lonely, I'm so lonely. My heart is empty and I've been so hungry. All I need for my hunger to ease. Is anything that you can give me please. I ain't got nothing, I heard no good news. I fill my pockets with those reservation blues. Those old, those old rez blues, those old reservation blues. And if you ain't got choices. What else do you choose? And if you ain't got choices. Ain't got much to lose" (Alexie, 1995, p. 1)

The quotation above is the lyrics of "Reservation Blues," which portray life marked by loneliness, poverty, and limited choices on the reservation. Phrases such as "dancing all alone" and "I'm lonely" present the subject's experience of isolation, including feeling misunderstood and separated from the social environment.

Meanwhile, the line "And all I had for dinner was some sleep" represents hunger that is not only physical but can also be understood as emotional hunger. This hunger includes a lack of support, empathy, and access to a decent life. The lyric "my heart is empty and I've been so hungry" strengthens the image of inner emptiness caused by oppressive social conditions.

The peak of social criticism in this song appears in the question, "if you ain't got choices, what else do you choose?" This question captures the dilemma of reservation life where people face an extremely narrow space of choices. From a phenomenological perspective, this song articulates the inner experience of feeling "trapped" and "unheard," a lived experience formed by the structural realities of the reservation that restrict opportunity and social mobility.

Thus, "Reservation Blues" functions as a modern form of oral tradition that communicates social reality while strengthening collective awareness of Native American marginalization. In Native American cultures, songs and lyrics are often used as oral tradition media to convey stories, history, and collective emotions



(Patterson, 2002). These lyrics continue that function by reflecting reservation life. The song does not only represent individual experience, but also speaks to the collective experience of reservation communities, reinforcing its role as part of Native American oral tradition in a modern context.

Social criticism also appears in the song “Treaties.”

“Treaties. Treaties never remember. They give and take ‘til they fall apart. Treaties never surrender. I’m sure treaties we made are gonna break this Indian’s heart... I just know it ain’t easy. It’s just like signing a treaty.”
(Alexie, 1995, pp. 31–32)

The song “Treaties” connects personal experience, such as betrayal in relationships, with the collective experience of Native American communities that repeatedly face broken agreements by those in power. The phrase “treaties never remember” suggests an unequal power relation: agreements can be treated as forgettable by the dominant side, while their effects continue to be felt by the harmed side.

Through the comparison “love... like signing a treaty,” the song places historical wounds into the language of everyday experience. In this way, criticism of political history and colonialism is not expressed abstractly, but is presented through emotional experiences that are close to personal life. From a phenomenological perspective, this song shows how historical pain persists as an inner experience that repeats in consciousness, even when expressed through seemingly personal themes such as love and family relationships.

Therefore, “Treaties” functions as a medium to remember and to critique the history of treaty violations that forms part of Native American marginalization. The song does not only voice individual disappointment, but also represents collective memory of inherited injustice that continues to shape how Native American communities understand relationships, trust, and promises in their lives.

Beyond socio-political criticism, songs also become a medium for expressing trauma and resistance to spiritual colonialism, as seen in “My God Has Dark Skin.”

“My God Has Dark Skin. My braids were cut off in the name of Jesus. To make me look so white. My tongue was cut out in the name of Jesus. So I would not speak what’s right. My heart was cut out in the name of Jesus. So I would not try to feel. My eyes were cut out in the name of Jesus. So I could not see what’s real. And I’ve got news for you. But I’m not sure where to begin. Yeah, I’ve got news for you. My God has dark skin. My God has dark skin. I had my braids cut off by black robes. But I know they’ll grow again. I had my tongue cut out by these black robes. But I know I’ll speak ‘til the end. I had my heart cut out by the black robes. But



I know what I still feel. I had my eyes cut out by the black robes. But I know I see what's real." (Alexie, 1995, pp. 131–132)

The song "My God Has Dark Skin" portrays the narrator's traumatic experience of losing physical, emotional, and spiritual identity in the name of religion. The trauma is visualized through images of bodily injury: braids being cut, the tongue taken, the heart removed, and the eyes gouged out. This representation shows how spiritual and cultural violence operates directly on the body and on consciousness. However, despite the trauma, the narrator also shows resilience by asserting the ability to speak, to feel, and to see the truth, while trying to rebuild identity.

The statement "My God has dark skin" functions as a strong symbolic assertion rejecting the colonial God imposed by the "black robes," representing Christian religious institutions. At the same time, it replaces that image with a representation of God aligned with Native American cultural and spiritual identity. In the context of oral tradition, collective experiences and resistance to cultural erasure are often expressed through songs as shared media (Patterson, 2002). Therefore, this song can be understood as a modern form of oral tradition in which trauma and resilience are conveyed through music to maintain collective memory.

The repetitive chorus "My God has dark skin" recalls patterns in traditional Native American singing, which often uses repetition to emphasize spiritual and emotional meaning. The body symbols in these lyrics also carry strong meanings: braids symbolize cultural identity that is harmed but can grow again, as stated in "But I know they'll grow again"; the tongue symbolizes freedom of speech; the heart symbolizes the ability to feel; and the eyes symbolize the ability to see truth. Together, these symbols emphasize that even though colonialism attempts to erase the essence of Native American culture, it does not fully succeed in destroying the collective Indigenous spirit.

This song is a critique of spiritual colonialism and assimilation practices carried out by religious institutions. At the same time, it also becomes a medium of collective healing, because it provides space for Native American communities to confront historical trauma and strengthen cultural identity. By asserting that God has dark skin, the song rejects colonial narratives and celebrates spirituality rooted in Native American tradition. As a modern form of oral tradition, "My God Has Dark Skin" is important in preserving identity, processing trauma, and giving courage for the community to keep speaking, feeling, and surviving despite cultural erasure.

CONCLUSION

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* is a living and meaningful medium of cultural experience that represents Native American oral tradition. The novel shows the way of Native American communities in understanding the world, history, and the self



through myth of the magical guitar, stories told by Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and songs.

Oral tradition in *Reservation Blues* is an important aspect in preserving cultural identity, expressing collective trauma, and criticizing the marginalization of the Spokane people. Myth of the magical guitar presents both a symbol of spiritual and emotional conflict as it shows an ambivalent relationship between humans and supernatural power and a warning against compromising traditional values for worldly gain. Stories told by Thomas Builds-the-Fire creates a space for reflection on social and cultural dynamics that connects myth, local history, and contemporary lived experience of the Spokane community. Songs are a modern form of oral tradition that is close to everyday life that connects inner experience, historical trauma, and social critique.

This study confirms the importance of oral tradition in *Reservation Blues* in representing the way Native American communities make meaning of their lived experience under the pressures of colonialism and modernization. Oral tradition is a form of symbolic resistance and collective awareness of social injustice that also become an evolving medium that transmits social values and functions as a relevant cultural force in the Spokane community's struggle to maintain cultural identity and dignity.

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