



Rethinking the Survival Stratagem of Corliss in the Search Engine by Sherman Alexie

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ABSTRACT

The Search Engine is fundamentally a search for established individuality, a vision in the wilderness, and the meaning and definition of female protagonist Corliss. The present study explores the ways through which Native American hybridized identity survives in the white hegemonic cultural society. By using the theory of Evolution which is conceived by Charles Darwin, the research intends to highlight those characteristics of Corliss which make her a favorable species among stagnant and dormant tribal folks. Corliss' survival strategy includes navigating and challenging the systemic oppressions faced by Indigenous communities in North America by getting rich white education. The Search Engine advocates that conflicting identity or in more apt terminology an identity that is hanging between cultures can discover harmony and be conformed through mutual respect, flexible attitude and acknowledgement at an individual level. This research reinvestigate Corliss' journey which involves a progression from adopt to adapt to adept phase and her search for a stable identity while living in a mainstream society of Euro America. It deals with tussles and struggles of Corliss as she evolves through life in survival mode, particularly in regards to her experiences with her research of another traumatized poet Harlan Atwater. The effort to become recognized as a fully formed human being, as well as the desire to be treated with decency and equality rather than as second-class citizens is admirable. She fulfills the demands of anti-colonialist ideological identity; hence there is suppression over colonial subjects, subversion the colonialist discourse which eventually leads toward fine tuning the postcolonial identity that takes her to the desired status in the society unlike to her father and uncles.

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1. Introduction

Inside the legendary tale, "The Search Engine" by Sherman Alexie, the female protagonist Corliss plays a significant role in exploring themes of survival and adaptation in a hegemonic Euro-American society. Throughout the story, it becomes evident that Corliss has developed a survival strategy or stratagem deeply rooted in her Indigenous culture. For instance, she makes use of humor and irony to subvert stereotypes imposed on her by the dominant culture. Furthermore, Corliss' survival strategy includes navigating and challenging the systemic oppressions faced by Indigenous communities in North America. Alexie's incorporation of Corliss's survival strategy presents readers with a rethinking of how Indigenous peoples navigate societal oppression and cultural hegemony. Corliss' journey of

survival involves a progression from feeling like an outsider to becoming a confident and successful individual who is proud of her heritage and able to navigate between different cultures.

1.1. Background of the study and historical representation of Native Americans

Traditional history claims that Columbus discovered America in 1492 and communities who were living there before Columbus were named as Indians (Townsend, 2018) ; since Columbus and his crew members were on the mission to discover India. With the passage of time, common sense reclaims that the history is subjective and the communities who were living there were the real Native Americans who once declared as red Indians, history books likewise demonstrate this entitlement accurate. In America since 1492, Native Americans have been facing suppression, repression, colonialism, subjugation, wars, injustice, trauma, forced assimilation, killing, and mental and physical sufferings by US government through legislations as Pratt's motto was screaming to, "kill the Indian, save the man" (Westron, 2010).

In 1975, Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act were proceeded and Indians were permitted to speak on their behalf instead of their representation by whites. Throughout the history, they were not allowed to speak for their rights as they were enforced to assimilate with the mainstream (white) culture through Boarding schools 1879 and Dawes Act 1887. Moreover their representation was biased as they were reflected as a primitive and stagnant nation via paintings, literature, and government policies. An Anthropologist Oliver La Farge; he played a long yet crucial dynamic role in making government policies for the Native Americans, he concluded that, the Indian story is destined to the tragic ending (Raw material 177). He constantly reminded his people that Native Americans are vanishing people subsequently prerequisite to be documented.

Edward Curtis (1924) endeavored to guard Native Americans by portraying their images as exotic, violent, dark and red lost breed, war-hungry cannibals and a race which is going to vanish, no matter what survival strategy they adopt. Curtis' representation of Native Americans was self constructed and a reminiscent for a time and the view that they never existed or had lived for the very short time period; since they were unable to be the part of mainstream society as Roger Fischer goes on to say that, "they were dumb, drunken, dirty, and degraded". Hence, whites always pictured Indians as primitive and unvarying nevertheless it was shocking for Indians even when they saw those constructed images of themselves and could not recognize themselves in those (more Indian) images. Vine Deloria, Jr., discloses this malformation as he formulates, the "real Indians" were unable to relate themselves to those images which were used to describe the Indians to the whole world (Custer 82).

Afterwards, in late 20th century, boarding schools born highly intellectual Native American scholars who have ability and potentiality for counter back through their (hi)stories in the field of anthropology and literature. They start writing about white society and about themselves and distinguished themselves from the main society of white people (Dennis, 2007, p.1). Tyson (2023) clears this conception regarding Corliss who manages to have distinguished personality of herself as an Indian and still part of the mainstream society of U.S which made her a "cultural hybrid specie" (Tyson, 2023). Many Native American distinguished authors such as Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, Janet Campbell Hale, Louis Owens, Betty Louis Bell, Gloria Bird, LeAnne Howe, Alleson Adele Hedge Coke, Michael Dorris, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Greg Sarris, Susan Power, Diane Glancy, Fransis Washburn, and Sherman Alexie play their significant role in substantiating that Natives are not vanishing people and they do have capability for adaptation according to the state of affairs like any other surviving nations in the world.

Sherman Alexie is a Spokane poet and a well known writer; he belongs to the second generation of the Native American Renaissance— people who born in 20th century; 1960s and 70s (Adámková, 2011). He was the youngest Red Indian novelist who has achieved the fame which is nationally and internationally recognized (VanSpanckeren, 1994). "The Search Engine" by Alexie is the very first story in his collection of different stories named as "Ten Little Indians" which was published in 2003. "The search Engine" tells a story of the female protagonist whose major is English Literature, as she is a Spokane Indian equally as Alexie himself and has a live and wild passion for poetry and a "maximum life" as well (Alexie, 2003). It is a story of her journey where initially she adopts the master's narrative via her education,

lifestyle, and interests, subsequently, she comes into an adapt phase where she can involve her indigenous subject matters in the Anglo-European system and eventually she jumps into an adept phase which refers to the emancipation from the very traditional norms of Anglo-European system (Barry, 2020).

1.2. Statement of the problem

The present short story by Alexie deals with struggles and coping mechanisms of Corliss as she navigates through life in survival mode, particularly in regards to her experiences with her research of another traumatized poet Harlan Atwater.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To reinvestigate Corliss' journey which involves a progression from adopt to adapt to adept phase and her search for a stable identity while living in a mainstream society of Euro America.
- To find out some of those characteristics of Corliss which take her into frame of survival specie consistent with Charles Darwin

1.4. Research Questions

1. How did Corliss' journey of survival involve a progression from adopt to adapt to adept phase along with her search for a balanced identity?
2. What are those characteristics that expound Corliss as survival specie consistent with Charles Darwin?

1.5. Significance of research

This research paper can help the future researchers regarding their research about Darwinian adaptation along with historical or fictional characters in Native American literatures.

1.6. Delimitation

The present study is delimited to Corliss' adaptation and the adjustment or changes in behavior and physiology to become more suited to her environment. It could have applied the feminist or post colonialist perspectives nevertheless the current study is delimited to her survival stratagem.

2. Literature Review

Marchetti (1994) harangues that the biased rendering of Marginalized communities who are considered by whites they couldn't survive and primitive due to their indigenous discourse; it contributes to the perception that all nonwhite people possess wild behavior; they are untamed, violent, uncivilized, infantile and demand white education by showing this kind of cannibal behavior; this is no doubt a sweeping statement of generalization. During the course of history, they are (mis)represented by their colonizers; their representation is predisposed in Anglo-American discourse as primitive, uncivilized, static, unvarying, doomed to extinction, and people who cannot adapt to their environment. White colonialists produced some of the earliest works of writing in English on Native Americans, many of which relied primarily on binary, stereotypical savage/noble-savage stereotypes. By telling creation stories, Native Americans have historically kept their culture orally and songs about dreams in their aboriginal tongues (Vizenor, 1995). Red Indians or Native Americans who had attended English-language schools on their reservations began to write down their personal accounts of tribal customs and culture, life on the reservation, and being forced to convert to Christianity in the nineteenth century, marking the beginning of Native American literatures in English. However, it was difficult to find their printed projects (Owens, 1994). Later came 1960s; a time when social organizations were in support of ethnic minorities and iconoclast histories aided in the blossoming of Native American fiction, which eventually lead to the flexible attitude both for Native Americans and Whites as well. While some academics interpret this attention as "mainstream" institutions' recognition of Native American literatures (Porter & Roemer, 2005), others, like (Dennis, 2006), challenge this theory, claiming that despite the field's expansion, relatively few Native American works have been included in the larger canon of American literature. It appears that "reading" Native American literature contained in these institutional corpuses is a metaphor for what it's like to be an urban Native American in the twenty-first century and to be homeless at home.

Padgate (2021) examines how a young, urban indigenous woman is using post-colonialism to search for herself and an enigmatic Indian poet. He looks into the anti-colonialist philosophy of the book as well as strategies for bucking colonialism's dominance and adjusting to the postcolonial environment. He explains, "Through marginal characters who are conditioned by the sense of unhomeliness as a result of their socioeconomic disadvantages, the text presents anti-colonialist sentiments." "The unmasking of the hegemonic structures of power, the concern with dislocation and displacement, the reconstruction of history, universalizing the struggle, a belief in the power of the word to change the material conditions of people, the search for identity, albeit split, and the social and political function of art," is how (Dhouioui, 2021) sums up the tactics typical of postcolonial writing. Because the story's female protagonist satisfies the requirements of an anti-colonialist ideological identity, colonial subjects are suppressed and the colonialist discourse is subverted, which ultimately results in "fine tuning the postcolonial identity."

According to Mundi (2022), Corliss is an important character who confronts the negative stereotypes associated with girls of Native American descent. As she notes in her paper, Corliss is shown as an autonomous girl in many ways, and she understands Corliss' identity as an independent girl with great literacy. She is self-reliant when it comes to choosing her university major and her lifelong passions, which are reading and writing. This also gives her the independence to judge White people politically without deferring to her father or her clan. .. Her willingness to read a wide range of literary works develops her critical thinking skills and makes her a proficient reader. Corliss's remarkable reading can be explained by the narrative that follows. The 19-year-old girl has stated that she has "never met one human being more interesting to her than a good book" and that she would like to be "buried in a coffin filled with used paperbacks" (Alexie, 2003). Rahayu recognizes Corliss's distinct individuality in Alexie's portrayal of her in *The Search Engine*, despite the fact that her father and uncles describe her as having a completely different personality and advise her that those white books are terrible. Corliss expanded on the notion that a person's kindness is defined by their intelligence, education, literature, and poetry.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Darwinism, developed by Charles Darwin and others, is a theory of evolution regarding biology or can be said in a term of 'biological evolution' that elucidates how all species come into being and grow by way of natural selection. This process involves microscopic, inherited variations that enhance an individual's capacity to compete or compare with other species live on this earth, survive within his or her means, and reproduce according to the survival mechanism. Darwinism, sometimes referred to as Darwinian Theory, began with the comprehensive concepts of evolution or species transmutation. These concepts gained significant scientific acceptance following Darwin's publication of "On the Origin of Species" in 1859. This field of research predated Darwin's beliefs by a long shot. Thomas Henry Huxley first used the term "Darwinism" in April 1860.

Pyotr Kropotkin, a Russian geographer and prominent anarchist, challenged prevalent interpretations of Darwinism in his book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). He argued that cooperation, rather than fierce competition, is the key factor in facilitating evolution in both of the species; human societies and animals. Kropotkin used biology and sociology for his arguments to show that mutual aid is a widespread survival mechanism, which counters political, economic, and social theories of that time. He criticized opponents such as Huxley, who upheld the idea of competition as the hub of evolution. Kropotkin believed that both of the species; human societies and animal kingdom that practice mutual aid are the most innumerable, prosperous, and progressive simultaneously. This is due to the benefits of mutual preservation, the possibility of attaining old age and assembled experience, higher intellectual development, and the growth of socially engaged habits. This growth in human community can be clearly visible via Corliss by Sherman Alexie as he portrays her as adaptive specie among and unlike her tribal men. In contrast, unsociable species are doomed to decay Being similar to uncivilized animals, Corliss' father and uncles never attended college and were all construction workers who never questioned the authoritative person who had instructed them to pick up a wrench (Alexie, 2003). According to Kropotkin, "In the animal world we have seen that the vast majority of species live in societies, and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life." This statement captures the essence of his understanding of Darwinism. "Darwinism" quickly became synonymous with a variety of evolutionary philosophies spanning

both biology and society. One particularly notable approach was encapsulated in Herbert Spencer's 1864 phrase "survival of the fittest." According to the theory of natural selection or survival of the fittest, (both of the) species produce more offspring than can survive in their environment.

Those with greater physical fitness are more likely to survive, mature, and reproduce. Conversely, those without such fitness may not reach reproductive age or produce fewer offspring. The term "survival of the fittest" is often used to describe natural selection because the well-suited organisms for their environment are the ones most likely to successfully reproduce and pass on their advantageous traits to their upcoming generations. As environments change, so do the traits necessary for survival, leading to gradual evolution. Corliss' growth has always been interconnected with her survival strategy; the more she grows whether it was personally, psychologically, mentally, and educationally, the more were the chances for her to survive among her tribal men and Euro Americans as well. Natural selection was such a influential explanation for the evolution of life that it had become a scientific theory. Although many people may describe natural selection as "survival of the fittest," this explanation is often misunderstood. Those unfamiliar with the concept may assume that only the strongest, fastest, or smartest individuals survive in nature. However, this is not always the case by way of Corliss' uncles and father claim. Darwin's use of "fittest" in his book referred to the individuals best suited for their immediate environment; so as the Corliss did, for instance, she explains herself, "she was destined for something larger, that she believed she was supposed to be eccentric and powerful and great" (Alexie, 2003) and not necessarily the physically superior specimens of the species. Darwinian Theory, particularly when used in social situations (such as Social Darwinism), helped to justify colonialism and imperialism. These ideologies frequently represented indigenous peoples as "less fit" or "less evolved" than their colonizers, offering an alleged scientific justification for colonized nations' exploitation and marginalization. Post colonialism strives to examine and deconstruct these narratives, emphasizing indigenous cultures' resilience, agency, and contributions. Both Darwinian Theory and post colonialism address power dynamics in societies, but from different angles. Darwinian Theory investigates power dynamics within species, namely evolutionary fitness and resource rivalry. In contrast, post colonialism examines power dynamics in colonial and postcolonial contexts, with a focus on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other intersecting identities. By taking into account these interlocking power dynamics, post colonialism provides a more nuanced view of social disparities and their historical roots.

It follows that people with favorable adaptations will live longer enough to pass on their genes to their offspring since an individual needs the most advantageous features to thrive in the environment. Because the "unfit" won't likely survive long enough to pass on their undesirable qualities, the undesirable traits will eventually be bred out of the population. It could take several generations for the undesirable traits to become less prevalent and even longer for them to vanish from the gene pool. Hence, the undergone discussion ambitions to approach Sherman Alexie's *The Search Engine* using Darwinian critical framework related to adaptation of Corliss according to her environment focusing on the concepts of "survival specie" among her stagnant and inflexible indigenous folks. The present study has been done through the collection of primary and secondary materials available in different articles on internet and in the text itself. It has been done by analyzing and evaluating Darwin's theory consistent with Corliss' survival stratagem while living in a conventional white society from where she gets an education and becomes the survival specie who adapts what is necessary for inordinate survival.

4. Textual Analysis and Discussion

"The Search Engine" is fundamentally a search of established individuality, "of a vision in wilderness, and of meaning and definition" (Alexie, 2003). From the very commencement of the story, her surveillance and analytical skills are ostensible when she wants amity among a white couple in the library. She does believe in harmony and evolution in her life and does the same as it is discernible in her thought, "She believed in the endless nature of human possibility. She would be delighted if these two messy humans transcended their stereotypes and revealed themselves as mortal angels" (Alexie, 2003). Her belief in the endless nature of human possibility and diminutive steps toward the adaptation affording to her environment for survival is significant in this sense as Darwin suggests that, "Natural selection acts solely by

accumulating slight successive favorable variations, it can produce no great or sudden modification; it can act only by very short steps" (quotefancy.com). Corliss is the specie who is aware of the fact that stagnation is not even the least possible resolution for living or existing rather adaptation is while having eminent personality traits which are prominent in her aboriginal community.

Corliss does not take things for-granted which is another stratagem and advantage for her survival particularly; the man who was sitting in front of her in the library was quoting W.H Auden and she feels that she does not have copious knowledge about this particular poet so she asked this to that white man as Alexie engraves, "Corliss needed to know the serious answers to her silly questions ...so she gathered her books and papers and approached that couple" (Alexie, 2003). To have curiosity is one of the most imperative human traits when it comes to adaptation and survival; species need to know in penetration about their environment for incarnate and for counter back as well. Ignorance can never be applicable in any circumstances exclusively for Native Americans as they have to live and exist as mature citizens in different parts of the United States. The responsibility to prove them as 'us' in binary opposition of us and them has become doubled due to their increasing population as homeless beings. She is aware of this datum as well subsequently she has to behave like an educated and responsible student of Euro-American schooling system.

Appreciation for others seems along the lines of ordinary things nonetheless it is not. Corliss makes this ideology very clear when she appreciates that white woman the moment when she leaves the white man who was quoting W.H. Auden by "rejecting at the speed of light" (Alexie, 2003). "She was pleased with the young woman's quick decision and quicker fight. If she could resist one man's effort to shape and determine her future, perhaps she could resist all future efforts" (Alexie, 2003). For Native Americans 'say no' is a gigantic object and Corliss feels pleased after experiencing it. Her confidence and honesty can be perceived as her survival stratagem as this actively demonstrates that she is not coward and unfair with herself and with her environment which includes her education, family, Spokane tribe and white men society as well, "she was confident enough to approach strangers" (Alexie, 2003) Her comment for that white man explicitly illustrates her honesty and observation, "you are cute and smart, and you have gotten everything you have ever asked for, and that makes you lazy and dangerous" (Alexie, 2003). This is where; her confidence speaks aloud and saves her from his dangerous moves.

Corliss' rich education from white people Alexie (2003) is the top most survival stratagem; as she declares herself a "resourceful thief, a narcissist Robin Hood who stole a rich education from white people and kept it" (Alexie, 2003). This is the exclusive reason for her survival in natural selection, in contrast to her uncles and father who do not like books at all and particularly poetry and poets; they are unfavorable species who do not progress within their environment. It is so internalized in their consciousness that they cannot get an education from the white schooling system; hence they could work only blue-collar jobs (work at construction locations) for their survival and subsequently inciting "individual fears and collective lack of ambition" (Alexie, 2003).

Instead of picking up a wrench, they could pick the books that could alternate their whole life; it could lead them toward adaptation and eventually to survival like Corliss. Darwin's theory suggests, if the environment changes faster than organisms, there are possibilities that some species may not be able to adopt fast enough as the speed of environmental changes through natural selection, it can be seen in case of her uncles and father who are rigid in their views about life and education. Darwin subsequently engages in a process of reevaluation by meticulously examining the fossil record. It is a well-established fact that numerous life forms that previously inhabited our planet have ceased to exist. Dinosaurs, for instance, serve as a prime illustration of this phenomenon. The extirpation of species can be attributed to a myriad of factors, including the intrusion of invasive species, the proliferation of disease-causing organisms, abrupt and calamitous shifts in the environment, or the emergence of exceptionally adept predators. (<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/natural-selection/>). Similarly, readers do know Corliss but they do not or know little about other Spokane Indians in United States or their struggles in their lives respectively. Hence, the more the species adapt, the more are the hazards for their survival as the following picture shows:

to ruminate about Native and Whites (more) hate game for each other, instead she throws light on good parts of Americans without having any biased generalization which is another proof that she is historically and socially literate and this is what distinguishes her from the rest of unfavorable species. As Alexie writes, "it was easy to hate white vanity and white rage and white ignorance, but what about white compassion, white genius and white poetry? Maybe it was not about whiteness or redness or any other color. Corliss was not naïve....she wanted to believe in human goodness and mortal grace" (Alexie, 2003). Corliss intensifies the ideas that education, literature, poetry, compassion, respect and flexibility in attitudes are parameters for living a dignified life.

Many post colonialist scholars interpret Corliss's adept phase as her confrontation against whites along with Harlan Atwater's poetry book. Instead of looking at it as "fine tuning the postcolonial identity" (Padgate, 2021) it can be countersigned as her tangible "vision quest" (Alexie, 2003). Her interaction with homeless guy (Professor Williams) at McDonalds makes us realize that it is easy to be homeless in the vast Seattle and rely on others for basic needs: food, shelter, and clothes. Corliss can never afford this sort of failure in her life as she is an educated young adult who is not rigid, static, and unfavorable species rather she adapts and adjusts herself in mainstream society from where she can help her Spokane Indians siblings and relatives. That was her survival among other Indians that she offered the homeless guy a full super meal at McDonalds, "you give me directions out of the goodness of your heart. And I'll buy you a lunch out of the goodness of my heart" (Alexie, 2003). To contribute respect is the key element for survival in any interface as Alexie pens Professor's words, "That sounds like a safe and sane human interaction" (Alexie, 2003).

Corliss' "vision quest" leads her to another dimension of intellectuality which assembles her more humble and strong as Alexie writes, "On every mission, there is a time to be strong and a time to be humble"(Alexie, 2003). Her confession about her confusion makes the reader to rethink about a survival species who is not static and does not consider herself a perfect Indian or White student rather she accepts that, "I am really confused about—well, I am confused about my whole life right now" (Alexie, 2003), hence, this is another evidence that she is surviving, this actively demonstrates that being confused and "lost bird" (Alexie, 2003, p.40) opens new gates for evolution by natural selection. It is in the very nature of every human being to succeed besides the situation is promising through adaptation.

5. Conclusion

The present discussion scrutinizes Sherman Alexie's *The Search Engine* based on the critical framework of the theory of evolution by natural selection with specific references to Darwin's concepts of adaptation and survival of the fittest. Following the objectives set for the study, the brief yet explained analysis pursues that the text offers a middle way to survive in the hegemonic white cultural society; adaptation. The more the species adapt according to their environment, the more there are probabilities that they subsist in a systematic and organized way without being ended up as homeless creatures. Corliss intensifies the ideas that education, literature, poetry, compassion, respect, and flexibility in attitudes are parameters for living a dignified life. The analysis scrutinizes that the text's fundamental purpose to navigate the conflicting ideologies is through mutual respect and recognition at an individual level. The solitary way to negotiate belligerent ideologies is again having a flexible and adjusting approach while possessing an affected sense of individuality. Succinctly, Corliss' rich white education which develops her critical thinking makes her able to survive in the mainstream society where the rest of Indians are unknown, homeless, or blue construction workers, nevertheless she, while possessing a strong sense of individuality survives and becomes favorable species among immobile Spokane Indians.

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