IN THE LIMINALITY OF THEIR FEMININITY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE OTHERED SEX IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S "THE SEARCH ENGINE"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representations of the female characters in Sherman Alexie's short story titled "The Search Engine." The analysis employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial and feminist theory of subalternity, specifically the conceptual aspects concerning the transparency of intellectual and strategic essentialism, as the main framework. The examination reveals that the text, in its preoccupation with contesting colonialism, becomes complicit in legitimizing androcentrism and essentializing femininity. By empowering the female protagonist with male authority and judgement, through her ideological association with such patriarchal institutions as Christianity and epic literature, the text alienates and marginalizes the other female characters who are found to represent traditionally female stereotypes. On account of this ideological oversight, called 'the transparency of the intellectual' by Spivak, the male-female dichotomy is consequently reinforced, the former presented as a hero, the latter as a bozo. Following Spivak's recommendation of 'strategic essentialism' as a reactive approach for the subaltern to mobilize in solidarity through temporary essentialization, this study rallies the marginalized females in Alexie's story and gives them the space and spotlight as the 'dumb blonds,' the 'ugly/old bores' and the 'mad women,' hoping that this could serve as a paradigm for strategically promoting solidarity in the face of sexist essentialism that is still much prevalent today.

Keywords: The Search Engine; Sherman Alexie; feminine stereotype; transparency of the intellectual; strategic essentialism; postcolonialism

1. INTRODUCTION

"The Search Engine" is the first, and arguably the most prominent, story in the 2003 short story collection titled *Ten Little Indians* by Native American author Sherman Alexie, winner of numerous book awards such as the 1993 PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction (for *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*), the 1996 American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation (for *Reservation Blues*), the 2007 U.S. National Book Award for Young People's Literature (for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), and the 2010 Native Writers' Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award (Kuiper, n.d.; Alexie, n.d.; Alexie, 2010). The plot follows the story's Indigenous protagonist, nineteen-year-old Corliss Joseph, in her quest to identify and locate an obscure Spokane Indian poet named Harlan Atwater. The search

involves a geographical and spiritual journey and turns out to have historical and ideological relevance. Self-confessed "approximately homeless" (Alexie, 2003, p. 29) Corliss takes the Greyhound from Pullman, Washington, to downtown Seattle to confirm the existence of a supposed kindred spirit, an Indian with a love for poetry—regarded somewhat as an anomaly among her kinsfolk. Harlan is eventually revealed to have been adopted from birth by a white couple and does not have any real personal values attached to the Indigenous tribe beyond his DNA. The physical and psychological displacement of both Harlan and Corliss is indicative of Native Americans' colonized history of nineteenth-century forced migration and twentieth-century urban integration. It also represents "the shifting and precarious nature of recognition and identity" (Roberts, 2018, p. 10) that essentially constitutes both the question and the answer posited in the story; the pain of identity recognition can only be alleviated by accepting that postcolonial identities are "constantly changing and, inevitably, clashing" (Padgate, 2021, p. 156).

In terms of postcolonial integration, "The Search Engine" offers a means to which some marginalized others adhere in their negotiation with persistent cultural subjugation. Murtaza & Bhatti (2016) point out that Alexie's fiction encourages forward movement by gradually accepting modern socio-cultural compulsions in place of complete rejection of the white culture. Padgate (2021, p. 157) specifically suggests that the colonial discourse of Christianity and history is subverted in "The Search Engine" to free the disenfranchised from internalized cultural stigmas and allow them to play leading, heroic roles in their own stories. Farrington (2015, p. 3), furthermore, indicates that by making intelligible the voices of various urban Indians, Alexie's work speaks for the diversity, anonymity and visibility of Indians in the city, hence implying new, diversified urban Indian traditions.

While these claims for discursive adjustment as a pathway to emotional emancipation are amply validated by textual evidence, it could be observed that they are largely applicable to the male characters and advocates for patriarchal authority. The female characters in general are not excused from the normalized oppression of their gender. In other words, they are still very much colonized by the dominant male culture. Lafi (2013, p. 49) investigates the representations of Native American women in Alexie's short story and concludes that they are stereotyped and sexualized by the influence of the traditional media and literature and that these representations are subsequently internalized by Native Americans themselves. The study, nevertheless, focuses on the obvious victims, the intersectionally discriminated—the Indigenous females who are submitted to both racial and sexual oppression. Although intersectionality is a useful approach for understanding the "interlocking identity categories such as gender, race, and class, among others" (Wagner, 2015, p. 52), it occasionally diverts the spotlight from the issue at hand. For example, by stating that "a white woman might be marginalized by her gender while still privileged by her race. Her experience of oppression is different than a black woman whose experience of sexism is informed by racism" (Wagner, 2015, p. 52), sexual discrimination against both groups of women could be blindsided by the urgency of racialized premises.

The present study, therefore, proposes to examine the representations of the female characters in Alexie's "The Search Engine" regardless of their skin color in order to posit that the liberating postcolonial condition celebrated in previous studies privileges and prioritizes male dominance, often at the cost of belittling that of 'the othered sex,' wherefore the portentous trap of 'the postcolonial reason' could be revealed. To achieve this, five female characters are called to the spotlight and examined based on their stereotypes as Bulimic Girl, Star Girl, Hysterical Mom, Drab Librarian, and Yarn Woman to point out the largely unquestioned male-female dichotomy of brain-beauty, activity-passivity, and rationality-irrationality binaries that essentialize female shortcomings. Together with references to various feminine stereotypes from previous studies, the postcolonial concept of 'othering' constitutes the general premise of the analysis in which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial and feminist theory of subalternity, the transparency of the intellectual and strategic essentialism is employed as the key framework for the discussion.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyze the representations of the female characters in Sherman Alexie's short story "The Search Engine" based generally on the postcolonial concept of 'othering' and specifically on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory, which includes her postulations regarding 'the transparency of the intellectual' and 'strategic essentialism.' A brief explanation of the term 'othering' and an introduction to Spivak's tenets of postcolonial and feminist subalternity are provided below.

In postcolonial studies, the term 'othering' refers to the colonizers' treatment of the colonized as inferior, thus automatically putting the latter in a lower social hierarchy. As a literary theory, postcolonial criticism is frequently implemented to investigate various social and political manifestations in order to address different aspects of oppression such as classism, racism and sexism (Tyson, 2006, pp. 417–433; Tyson,

2011, p. 245–251). The practice of othering, consequently, affords the 'us-them' binary differentiation which, in terms of classism, racism and sexism, could be manifested as 'rich-poor,' 'white-black' and 'male-female' respectively. 'Sexism,' a term coined in the 1960s, refers to the hierarchical relationship between the sexes in the social systems "where the category 'man' or 'male' is the norm and the category 'woman' or 'female' represents the 'other' and the 'abnormal,' that is the 'marked version'—logically following the normativeness of the male" (Wodak, 1997, p. 7). Western logocentrism, in addition, naturalizes colonialist/male dominance through countless representations of the rationality-irrationality and activity-passivity dichotomy in which the male colonialists are represented as rational and active whereas the female and the colonized are represented as irrational and passive. The present study focuses on examining the 'marked' category of the gendered others; that is, the othering of those outside the dominant androcentrism—male-centeredness—that, consciously or otherwise, governs Alexie's text.

Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci employs the term 'subaltern' and 'subordinate' interchangeably to refer to "[n]on hegemonic groups or classes" (Gramsci, 1999, p. 20) in the context of Italian peasants in the rural South whose collective lack of political identity subjected them to the social and ideological dominance of Mussolini's government in the early twentieth century. Subaltern Studies historians draw parallels between Mussolini's Italy and Postcolonial India and extend Gramsci's original term to include "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha, 1988, as cited in Morton, 2003, p. 48). Using Gramsci's Marxist tenets on subalternity as a springboard, Spivak welcomes the general premises of the Subaltern Studies collective while pointing out that such an approach privileges male subaltern as agents of change within the narrative of elite nationalism that does not necessarily cater to the struggles of women, peasants and the tribals, referred to as "a continuous sign chain" by Spivak (1987, p. 198). She then calls for a perspective shift from the national independence movement to social movements to illustrate that "the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the 'subaltern'" (Spivak, 1987, p. 197) and suggests that literary texts can serve to articulate the struggles of subaltern groups such as women (Spivak, 1987, pp. 179–187). In this study, a subaltern is understood in Leich's encapsulation of Spivak's concept as "a person holding a subordinate position" and standing "in an ambiguous relation to power—subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity" (Leich, 2001, p. 2194).

In an influential and controversial essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" originally given as a lecture in 1983 and extended in print in 1985, 1988 and 1999, Spivak expresses "the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow" (Spivak, 1999, p. 266). The implication is that well-intentioned scholars and policy-makers who have the intellectual and linguistic privilege to speak for the oppressed could very well end up reinforcing the colonialist ideology against which they are battling. Giving the Hindu practice of widow sacrifice as an example, Spivak points out that by unsilencing Hindu wives through the outlawing of this ritual in India, the British have cemented their imperialist power by highlighting the essentialist difference between civilization and barbarism—between British "legal science" and Indian "superstition" (Spivak, 1999, p. 288)—as well as by suggesting that "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1999, p. 287). Spivak calls such a twist "the transparency of the intellectual" (Spivak, 1999, p. 265). Since the subaltern have no means to 'speak' intelligently about their situations, and their mediacies—performed by the so-called 'intellectual'—could potentially worsen their conditions, the answer to the question posed by Spivak—"Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?" (Spivak, 1999, p. 284)—is a disheartening 'No': "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 1999, p. 308).

As "a feminist literary critic pulling deconstruction into the service of reading" (Spivak, 1999, p. 245), Spivak is wary of essentialism—defined as "the belief that certain people or entities share some essential, unchanging "nature" that secures their membership in a category" (Leich, 2001, p. 2194)—and its tendency to create problematic knowledge about 'the other' (Mambrol, 2016). However, in line with activists for Difference Feminism who promote "women's ways of knowing" in the revaluation of essentialist feminine qualities such as caring, empathy and subjectivity ("Feminisms," n.d.), Spivak argues for 'strategic essentialism,' a temporary essentialization to create solidarity among minority groups or nationalities who may have strong differences in order to work for a common, often political, cause (Mambrol, 2016). Spivak discusses the concept of 'strategic essentialism' in a 1984 interview:

> In fact, I must say I am an essentialist from time to time … You see, you are committed to these concepts [universalism and essentialism], whether you acknowledge it or not. I think it's absolutely on target not to be rhetorically committed to it, and I think it's absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism … But strategically we cannot … let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it … The universalism that one chooses in terms of anti-sexism is what the other side gives us, defining us genitally. You pick up the universal that will give you

the power to fight against the other side, and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity. (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, pp. 11–12)

The reliance on and the fluid adaptation of Western concepts have led to "certain uneasiness … about the ideological contamination of theory" where Spivak is criticized for using Western postcolonial models as "historical necessity" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 69), to which her response is characteristically non-committed:

I am not interested in defending the post-colonial intellectual's dependence on Western models: my work lies in making clear my disciplinary predicament. My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by the Marxists as too codic, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western theory. I am uneasily pleased about this. One's vigilance is sharpened by the way one is perceived, but it does not involve defending oneself. (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, pp. 69–70)

Based on Spivak's projection of the silenced "subaltern as female" (Spivak, 1999, p. 308), the present study intends to illustrate how 'the transparency of the intellectual' works to reinforce the colonialist ideology of male domination. To achieve this, the representations of the female characters in Alexie's "The Search Engine" are investigated alongside descriptions of various female stereotypes. Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' is then discussed as an approach for the gendered subaltern to make the best out of such representations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"The Search Engine" could be read as a manual for maneuvering in the postcolonial landscape. The story's female protagonist, Corliss, ventures on a vision quest "in search for meaning and definition" (Alexie, 2003, p. 27). In an attempt to quell the nagging questions of "Who am I? Who am I supposed to be?" (Alexie, 2003, p. 27), Corliss reinvents herself in what Gilbert and Gubar name "a revisionary process" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 49):

In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called "Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction … an act of survival" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 49).

As pointed out by Padgate (2021, pp. 153–154), Corliss's recognition of self-heroism, by assuming the credence firstly of Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins and secondly of epic hero Odysseus, enables her to respect a homeless man on his own terms, to appreciate Harlan's hard-earned self-contentment and to come to terms with her own postcolonial Indigenous identity. In all of these instances, the key characters are male or, in Corliss's case, a medium of male authority possessing such social institutions as religion: "maybe she was also a Jesuit priest who found [comfort] in poetry" (Alexie, 2003, p. 14) and literary traditions: "Maybe she was Odysseus" (Alexie, 2003, p. 28). The reward of successful negotiation in the postcolonial space could consequently be said to be male-oriented. The female characters, other than the empowered and masculinized Corliss, are ideologically othered by the text's emphasis on patriarchal conformation. In other words, they are effectively subalterns.

The following sections explore the ways in which these female subalterns are (re)presented in the story, the transparency of such essentialist representations through default gendered typecasts and the tricky question of whether these representations could be viewed as 'strategic' or further applied 'strategically' and constructively.

3.1 Examining the representations of the othered sex

This section examines the representations of five female characters; that is, all the female others besides Corliss, in "The Search Engine." All are presented as peripheral and inconsequential. All are invariably patronized by Corliss—a delegate of institutionalized judgement—or a male character. Mediated through their interactions with Corliss, these female characters are typically represented as pretty, dumb, dull or mad, or a combination of some or all of these 'feminine' traits, and, as all but one are unnamed, can be essentially and individually 'labelled' as Bulimic Girl, Star Girl, Hysterical Mom, Drab Librarian, and Yarn Woman.

Although being 'blond' belongs to the Eurocentric beauty standards and has been promoted in many pro-Aryan racist propagandas, being 'blond and dumb' is a sexist label aimed exclusively at women, especially pretty women. The 'dumb blond' stereotype could be dated back to the 1775 play *Les Curiosités de la Foire* (Morosini, 2020; Salarzar, n.d.) in which the blond female lead misbehaves and takes long pauses before speaking, thus giving the impression that she is slow-witted. The 1953 Hollywood film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* emphasizes the stereotype by portraying a blond character played by Marilyn Monroe as

absentminded and sexually available. Famed director Alfred Hitchcock, by describing blond characters as "virgin snow," implies that they are intellectually uncomplicated and cinematically unsuspecting, making them useful red-herrings in suspense films (Morosini, 2020).

Bulimic Girl, despite her mainstream prettiness, is insipidly displayed all through the brief paragraphs she is allowed to present her case. The first time she appears on the page, she is described in the context of seduction where her defense is largely ignored:

> Corliss looked up from her American history textbook and watched a young man and younger woman walk in together … The young woman set her backpack on the table and crossed her arms over her chest, but the young man didn't seem to notice or care about the defensive meaning of her body language." (Alexie, 2003, pp.1–2)

No sooner has her beauty been explicitly expressed than it is undercut by an equally explicit admission of disorder and ignorance:

> Blond, blue-eyed, pretty, and thin, she hid her incipient bulimia beneath a bulky wool sweater … She wasn't sure … why poetry itself was so important. She knew this coffee-drinking guy wanted to have sex with her, and she was considering it, but he wasn't improving his chances by making her feel stupid. (Alexie, 2003, pp. 1–2)

Displayed as a frail 'dumb blond,' in conjunction with a stocky and smart Indian (Corliss), Bulimic Girl becomes hopelessly one-dimensional, widening the already large gap of the 'beauty and brains' dichotomy. Interestingly, Corliss is saved from this lack of depth by her lack of 'standard' female beauty as well as her deviation from the much romanticized 'noble savage' mold. This also allows her to transit to other ideological stances—such as those shared by a male priest and a male warrior—more easily and convincingly.

Rather alarmingly, Bulimic Girl is by no means the only 'dumb blond' in the story. Star Girl is a red-lipped "cute … and blond" (Alexie, 2003, p. 43) hippie whose encounter with young Harlan Atwater confirms both the gendered typecast she represents and the Western romanticization of Native Americans she embraces. Although she is described by Harlan as "a good poet," he dismisses his own compliment straight away by adding that "she was no Plath or Sexton" (Alexie, 2003, p. 43). He, moreover, leaves no room for doubt that what attracts him to her is what is on her face, not what is in her head: "Harlan couldn't remember the last time he saw a hippie woman wearing Marilyn Monroe's lips" (Alexie, 2003, p. 43). However, when inevitably she acts out her superficiality by generalizing his pain: "You know, being Indian, man. That has to be a tough gig. The way we treated you and stuff" (Alexie, 2003, p. 44), and irrationally assuming responsibility for it: "Put your pain into me … I can take it. I need it. I deserve it" (Alexie, 2003, p. 45), he is repulsed: "But he'd never made love to a woman who wanted him to take revenge against her for hundreds of years of pain she never caused. Who could make love with that kind of historical and hysterical passion?" (Alexie, 2003, p. 45). Once Star Girl has been relegated to the rank of "any white woman" (Alexie, 2003, p. 46), Harlan "ran out the door, away from her" (Alexie, 2003, p. 47).

Hysteria, as opposed to rationalism, has long been associated with women. Gilbert and Gubar (1984) project that the pressure of patriarchal imperatives causes women to feel confined literally and figuratively and that the desire to escape this confinement creates "the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 86). Star Girl's "hysterical passion" (Alexie, 2003, p. 46) mirrors the anxieties to submit to mainstream expectations of Hysterical Mom, Corliss's own mother, who is lovingly and unapologetically described by her daughter as "manic" and "crazy" (Alexie, 2003 p. 18-19). Although, as "a loan officer for Farmers' Bank" (Alexie, 2003, p. 17), she is more financially accomplished than her husband and brothers-in-law who labor in "blue-collar construction jobs" (Alexie, 2003, p. 13), she is not independent of the machismo and imposition of the male members in her family. Her relative professional success serves as additional demands for more success so that her man could boast about his woman: "These men bragged about their spouses' accomplishments: *Ha, my woman just got a raise! My honey makes more money than your honey*!" (Alexie, 2003, p. 15). While Star Girl is consumed with white guilt and hippie ecstasy, Corliss's mother is preoccupied with equal doses of pride for her English-major daughter and pressure to conform to social—i.e., patriarchal—expectations of a 'professional' college degree: "Corliss, you know how your father feels about those poems … how are you going to get a job with poems?" (Alexie, 2003, p. 18). Torn between these two irreconcilable circumstances, she displays the 'psychic split' of submission and rebellion in what could be medically prescribed as a 'disorder':

> her mother was a bipolar storyteller who told lies during her manic phases and heavily exaggerated during her depressed times … According to the stories, Corliss had already been accepted to Harvard Medical School but had declined because she didn't feel Harvard would respect her indigenous healing

methods. You couldn't hate a mother full of such tender and flattering garbage, but you could certainly view her with a large measure of contempt." (Alexie, 2003, p. 18)

The split personality, in addition, is implicated in the stereotypical representation of Alexie's Drab Librarian. As Helms (2006, p. 4) suggests, the (female) librarian stereotypes present a possibility for an exploration of "the representation and repression of women through cultural expression," the most predominant of which is the undervalued, unassertive and "unattractive old maid" (Helms, 2006, pp. 36–37) wearing "modest clothes and eyeglasses" (Helms, 2006, p. 3). The fact that librarians are too often depicted in popular media as being tasked with such tedious responsibilities as stamping and shelving books perpetuates the impression of dullness both in their personality and in their intellect (Helms, 2006, pp. 3–4). Pagowsky and Rigby (2014, as cited in Keer & Carlos, 2015), however, proffer additional stereotypes of the profession which include "the sexy librarian, the superhero librarian, and the hipster or tattooed librarian." These stereotypes, it must be noted, are most readily and recognizably characterized as feminine, white women.

In "The Search Engine," the librarian—feminine and (presumably) white—at the Washington State University library, is introduced through Corliss's patronizing observation whose tone and term of endearment are unmistakably male: "The librarian was a small woman wearing khaki pants and large glasses. Corliss wanted to shout at her: Honey, get yourself some contacts and a pair of leather chaps! Fight your stereotypes!" (Alexie, 2003, p. 7). Drab Librarian, admittedly, in her "modest clothes and eyeglasses" (Helms, 2006, p. 3), surrenders to the "cultural expression" (Helms, 2006, p. 4) of a dull female. When she surprises Corliss with the depth of her professional knowledge and literary flair: "We're talking sixty percent of [books that never get checked out]. Seriously. Maybe seventy percent. And I'm being optimistic. It's probably more like eighty or ninety percent. This isn't a library, it's an orphanage" (Alexie, 2003, p. 8), Corliss is duly impressed: "Corliss knew she'd misjudged this passionate woman. Maybe she dressed poorly, but she was probably great in bed, certainly believed in God and goodness, and kept an illicit collection of overdue library books on her shelves" (Alexie, 2003, p. 8). This sudden shift in attitude stimulated largely by the element of surprise, nevertheless, only confirms and conforms to another convenient representation of the profession—the 'sexy' and rebellious, albeit covertly, librarian. In terms of sexist classification and objectification, Drab Librarian is probably not better off with this rebranding.

Dullness, by no accident, is also an implied attachment to the representation of Yarn Woman, an eighty-year-old (approximated by Corliss) lady and owner of a used-book store who introduces herself as "Lillian" (Alexie, 2003, p. 37). When Corliss enters the bookstore, a meeting venue suggested by Harlan, Yarn Woman is "crocheting behind the front desk" (Alexie, 2003, p. 36). In Greek Mythology, three weaving goddesses called the Fates, usually portrayed as old and grey, spin the threads of mortal lives and assign individual destinies to all beings at birth (Roman & Roman 2010, p. 171; "The Fates: The Destiny Goddesses," n.d.). Knitters, as a modern-day trope, are "elderly, sexless, sitting in God's waiting room and have nothing better to offer society than a knitted teddy bear or jumper" ("Let's End Knitting Stereotypes for Good: International Women's Day Special," 2018). In other words, they are generally dismissed as dull and disposable. It does not help that Yarn Woman is also wearing hearing aids, thus painted accordingly as physically deaf and stereotypically dreary and left out of the buzz of social, and postcolonial, relevancy. Corliss—young, brash and bisexual—demonstrates this social omission and stereotypical discrimination by snapping and sneering at the old woman's obvious lack of interpersonal and interactional intimacy: "'Is there a man waiting at home for you?' Corliss asked and immediately felt like a jerk" (Alexie, 203, p. 37). Yarn Woman's patient and 'straight' reply is, if anything other than kindness, a paraphrase of the knitter metaphor as "elderly, sexless" and "sitting in God's waiting room" ("Let's End Knitting Stereotypes for Good: International Women's Day Special," 2018): "'Oh, no,' the yarn woman said and smiled. 'My husband died twenty years ago. If he's waiting for me, he's all the way upstairs, you know?'" (Alexie, 2003, p. 37). Her eventual offer to switch off her hearing aids to give Corliss some privacy with Harlan could be read as tendering both "an eccentric act of kindness" (Alexie, 2003, p. 37) and a resignation to internalized marginalization that is the 'fate' of many of the outcast.

As illustrated, each of the five female others is pigeonholed into one or more feminine stereotypes in their representations in "The Search Engine." Some are depicted as pretty and dull (Bulimic Girl and Star Girl) while some are just dull with little to no hope for worldly excitement (Drab Librarian and Yarn Woman). Some, on the other hand, are overly stirred up to the extent of delusion (Star Girl, Hysterical Mom). All, however, are afforded neither the space nor the (literary) point of view to argue themselves out of the stereotypes of their gender. All, in other words, are confined in the liminality of their femininity.

Privileged by space and point of view, Corliss is exempt from such othering by stereotyping, idiosyncratically because she is the one executing most of the othering described above, yet ideologically because she has been masculinized by her identification with a white man (as Gerard Manley Hopkins), a colonialist (as Odysseus) and a postcolonialist (as genderflux). Consequently, both colonialist and

postcolonialist ideologies prevalent in the text lead to the reinforcement of androcentrism and the discrimination of female subalternity.

3.2 The transparency of the intellectual

As Spivak stipulates, the intellectual can be complicit in reinforcing the colonialist ideology by inadvertently promoting "the Self" while ignoring, dismissing or belittling "the Other" (Spivak, 1999, p. 266). Since Spivak describes herself as being viewed as "too male-identified" and "too committed to Western theory" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, pp. 69–70), 'the Self' she refers to could be assumed to take the position of the Western male. In the context of "The Search Engine," the point of view of 'the Self,' i.e. that of the Western male, being promoted is mediated by Corliss, a genderflux character who identifies with a white man (Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins) and a colonialist (epic hero Odysseus).

This ideological disguise, most probably unintentional, is well-layered and, consequently, unsuspected. Like Odysseus's brainchild, the characterization of Corliss as a postcolonial champion is a Trojan Horse minus ill intent. In the preoccupation with presenting a strong case for postcolonial negotiation to contest the colonialist monopoly of reason, the text becomes ironically 'complicit' in making androcentric representation a winning formula, thus not only nurturing this monopoly of reason but also rendering it exclusively male. Corliss's "anticolonialist epiphanies" (Padgate, 2021, p. 155) of the plurality of heroism, alas, end up discriminating what is considered non-heroic which, in this context, is equivalent to non-male.

By juxtaposing convenient, thus transparent, female stereotypes against Corliss's male-oriented ways and views favored by the text, the women are othered and the text becomes patriarchal in flavor. The 'postcolonial reason,' in this instance, backfires. The more Corliss is endowed heroically and intellectually, the more frivolous and erratic the other female characters appear by comparison. The brain-beauty, activity-passivity, and rationality-irrationality dichotomies that prioritize male "normativeness" (Wodak, 1997, p. 7) then become even more distinct. Beauty, passivity and irrationality, as the "marked version" (Wodak, 1997, p. 7) of such 'normativeness,' are relegated to the other/othered female characters and reflected by "the Self" (through Corliss's mediacy). The women become, in Spivak's words, "the Self's shadow" (Spivak, 1999, p. 266) with no means to 'speak' for themselves. In other words, they are "the subaltern as female" (Spivak, 1999, p. 308) that cannot be heard, and their oppression cannot be seen.

3.3 Essentialism: Transparent or strategic?

Sexism, without a doubt, is one of the most widespread social ills crippling the lives and livelihood of women of all ages regardless of their other social associations. Sexism has accordingly been described as causing, among others, a "dis-ease" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 51) and a disorder (Wodak, 1997, p. 7). However, it has also brought women together, as Wodak (1997, p. 7) points out: "With the concept of 'sexism', women defined themselves for the first time as a social group and as a suppressed minority." Being essentialized wholesale as weak, passive and irrational, women of different backgrounds have a common impetus to bond and form "alliances … across their differences" (Leich, 2001, p. 2194). Such alliances, manifested as feminist movements, frequently aim at challenging patriarchal power, analyzing the problems of gendered subjectivities and critically and politically undoing "the hegemony of universal man" (Plain & Sellers, 2007, p. 1). The success and the intensity of "the feminist project" in a wide range of practices and disciplines inevitably cause uneasiness and dissent among both opponents and proponents, and the very term 'feminist' provokes varying degrees of "ambivalent responses" (Plain & Sellers, 2007, p. 1).

Unlike Liberal Feminism—the leading form of feminist movements in the West which calls for equal rights for women—Difference Feminism emphasizes differences between women and men as well as traditional feminine qualities and perspectives. Since conventional gender roles are not alienated, Difference Feminism has been said to reinforce essentialism ("Feminisms," n.d.). Spivak adds to this strand of feminist proposition by recommending 'strategic essentialism' as a political tactic to unify minority groups based on their shared identity "to fight against the other side" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 12). Since "[t]he universalism that one chooses in terms of anti-sexism is what the other side gives us, defining us genitally" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 12), the unification of women in their fight against sexism would, in Spivak's tenet, be rooted in their (perceived) traditional femininity. In other words, they are united by their (perceived) stereotypes.

"The Search Engine," as discussed earlier, essentializes several female characters by portraying them as stereotypical of their gender and respective social associations. Bulimic Girl, Star Girl, Hysterical Mom, Drab Librarian, and Yarn Woman are of different ages, classes, races and even different centuries (Star Girl features in Harlan's flashback to the year 1973 while the rest are framed in the new millennium). Time-lapse aside, it would still be quite improbable that these different personalities could all unite on any other premises besides a struggle against sexism. In real life and with varying degrees of encouragement, they might bump into one another in women's rights rallies and form some kind of meaningful bond. On a page, however, they are separated by their superficial differences and disconnected by the lack of meaningful integration (in relation

not only to Corliss but also to the more developed male characters in the story). Their existence, individual or collective, in the storyline serves only to reflect others' frustrations and prejudices. It seems, therefore, like a safe bet to extrapolate that sexual essentialisms in "The Search Engine" remain transparent—that is, integral, impactful yet generally unquestioned—through to the end in spite of as well as because of the postcolonial goodwill.

This finding is neither too surprising nor too disappointing. Spivak herself readily admits the prevalence of such cultural influence: "I am an essentialist from time to time … you *are* committed to these concepts [universalism and essentialism], whether you acknowledge it or not" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 11) Instead of legitimizing sexism by defining oneself as anti-sexist and taking "a stand against the discourse of essentialism," Spivak recommends essentializing "strategically," even with the risk of utopianism (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, pp. 11–13). By bringing together the marginalized female characters in Alexie's short story and connecting them ideologically in the examination of their essentialized qualities, the present study aims to give them the space and spotlight not available to them in the economy of the story. Moreover, by zooming in on successive representations of these female stereotypes, this study confirms and adds to the results of Lafi's study (2013) which find that the media and literature play an influential role in stereotyping and sexualizing the representations of Native American women and that the women end up internalizing such representations of themselves. The present study extends this indication beyond the racial profiles to include women of different demographics who are, nonetheless, suppressed due to the one demographic category they all have in common—their sex. Through detecting the transparency of the intellectual and explicating Spivak's contention for essentialization, this study hopes firstly to prove that sexism is inescapably ingrained both socially and textually, and secondly to provide an instance that Spivak's advice can be followed 'strategically' to make us "vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it" (Spivak & Harasym, 1990, p. 11) and to mobilize available resources for a common goal.

As a final note, the depiction of Corliss and her revisionary process throughout the analysis may not seem kind to her. Yet it is what Adrienne Rich (as cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 49) calls "an act of survival." In the long run, Corliss herself could be reassessed, thus redeemed, as "a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1984, p. 49).

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the representations of five female characters in Sherman Alexie's "The Search Engine," nicknamed, for this study only, based on their stereotypes as Bulimic Girl, Star Girl, Hysterical Mom, Drab Librarian, and Yarn Woman. References from previous studies are made to support the investigation of these representations. The discussion of the findings is then framed based mainly on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial and feminist postulations regarding subalternity, and the transparency of the intellectual, and strategic essentialism.

The examination of the representations of the female characters reveals that all of the five characters are marginalized as the gendered subaltern by the male characters and/or the mediacy of patriarchal authority (the masculinized Corliss). Each of the women, in addition, is presented as stereotypical in one or more feminine categories. Bulimic Girl and Star Girl are the 'dumb blonds.' Drab Librarian and Yarn Woman are the 'ugly/old bores.' Star Girl and Hysterical Mom are the 'mad women.' As none of them is afforded the literary point of view to argue otherwise, they are essentially confined in the liminality of their femininity.

In its postcolonial preoccupation with contesting the colonialist monopoly of reason, "The Search Engine" endows Corliss with authorial and heroic identification with traditionally male-oriented institutions—Christianity and epic literature—thus inadvertently becoming 'complicit' in legitimizing androcentrism. Through this 'transparency of the intellectual,' the male-female dichotomy, far from being dismantled, is reinforced. The brain-beauty, activity-passivity, and rationality-irrationality binaries that prioritize male attributes and emphasize female shortcomings are stark when Corliss as a postcolonial hero is presented in juxtaposition with the stereotyped female characters.

It can be concluded, therefore, that sexism is ingrained both socially and textually, and that the essentialization of femininity in the story is impactful yet largely unquestioned by previous studies, possibly due to its transparency. The present study has, therefore, brought together these marginalized females to give them the space and spotlight as a paradigm for the strategic promotion of solidarity in the face of sexist essentialism.

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