



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Arts and literature**

**TINY LITTLE LIFEBOATS: HUMOUR AND CARTOONING AS STRATEGIC SOCIAL MULTITOOLS IN THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN**

**KEY WORDS:** Sherman Alexie, Young Adult Literature, Humour Theory, Social Agency, Indigenous Identity, Cartooning, Survival Strategies.

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**ABSTRACT** This research article explores the strategic use of humour and cartooning as transformative tools for survival and social integration in Sherman Alexie's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Following the journey of Arnold "Junior" Spirit, a Native American teenager navigating the profound cultural and socioeconomic divide between the Spokane Indian Reservation and an affluent all-white high school in Reardan, the study examines how wit functions as a multitool to recalibrate power dynamics and forge authentic connections. Drawing upon Sigmund Freud's relief theory of humour, the article analyses Junior's transition from the rouge nature of reservation to a sophisticated verbal strategy. It argues that Junior utilizes biting satire and self-deprecation to dismantle racial stereotypes and assert his agency among peers and bullies. Central to this analysis is Junior's cartooning. By bypassing the limitations of spoken language and Junior's own speech impediments, they communicate the complexities of his dual identity to white audience without requiring cultural translation. Ultimately, the research concludes that for Junior, humour and art are not merely defensive mechanisms but fundamental acts of defiance.

**INTRODUCTION**

Young adult literature can be generally defined as a literature dealing with teens aged 12 to 18. This literature is considered vague as constituent terms 'Young adult' and 'literature' are dynamic as they change with culture and society. Some experts in the field, such as Chris Crowe, describe YAL as including "all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults," whom he argues are typically between grades 7 and 12. (Richmond 1). This literature talks about various difficulties faced by the kids especially different kinds of trauma and the difficulties of adolescence.

Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a semi-autobiographical novel which follows the life of Arnold "Junior" Spirit, a native American teenager, who suffers through the hardships on the Spokane reservations. He is being born with hydrocephalus, which made him lisp and stutter, along with that he has several health issues including eyesight issues and Seizures. Junior gets beaten up by his fellow native American students almost every day and he is being bullied by them constantly as he was a nerd. His best friend is Rowdy who vows to protect him but his violent tendencies leave him unhelpful. Junior's parents are alcoholics and his sister Mary spends her time in the basement all the time. With a toxic household and bad health Junior navigates his life through cartoons. He leaves his underfunded school on Spokane reservations which is designed for Indians to fail, to attend a wealthy all white high school in Reardan.

This article talks about how Junior employs humour as a strategic social tool to dismantle stereotypes, recalibrate power dynamics, and forge authentic connections within the predominantly white environment of Reardan.

**Humour to tackle bullies**

In the novel, Junior's move from Wellpinit reservation To Reardan high school is a leap between colliding realities. Leaving the reservation is seen as a form of betrayal by his tribe and intrusion by his white classmates at Reardan. In order to overcome this friction, Junior adopts humour not merely as a defence mechanism but as a sophisticated social tool. By utilizing Humour to dismantle stereotypes and recalibrate power dynamics, Junior bridges the cultural gap

between his indigenous identity and the predominantly white world of Reardan. Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), talks about how humour serves as a release to the tension building up in the mind:

Freud addresses various causes of laughter and argues that all help regulate psychic energy. Laughter created when jokes address taboo subjects, for instance, constitutes a release of the energy that would otherwise have been used to repress those taboo feelings... so jokes provide pleasure by offering freedom from the constraints of reason. (MacDonald 67)

In this novel, humorous depiction of real-life incidents as cartoon serves as a way for Junior to release his pent up frustration and taboo subjects which cannot be talked about. The effective functioning of Junior's Humour is most evident in his interaction with Roger, School's Alpha male. When Roger insults Junior with a Racist Joke, Junior responds according to the unspoken rules of the reservation, he punches him in the face. However, this causes a dent in the social hierarchy. Junior realizes that physical dominance alone will not earn him a place in Reardan instead, he must pivot to a verbal strategy. By using his wit to engage Roger the following day, Junior moves the fighting ground from the playground to the intellect, where he can compete as an equal. By employing self-deprecating remarks and displaying an unexpected humour, he forces Roger to see him as an individual with agency rather than a racial caricature.

If you let people into your life a little bit, they can be pretty damn amazing. (Alexi, 132)

The jokes Junior tells act as a bridge between two sets of conflicting social hierarchies. On the reservation, respect is often tied to physical toughness, but at Reardan, it is tied to confidence and social charisma. Junior's biting humour allows him to translate his warrior spirit into a language Reardan understands. Ultimately, humour serves as the mechanism that allows Junior to recalibrate the power dynamics of Reardan, proving that wit can be just as formidable as physical strength in the pursuit of social agency.

**Humour as romantic bridge**

Humour also serves as the foundation for Junior's relationship

with Penelope. It allows him to break through her popularity to talk about their shared internal struggle. Junior's primary strategy for breaking this barrier is using humour to address their internal struggles, such as Penelope's bulimia and his own intense loneliness. By introducing humour into dark topics, he creates a safe social space that allows Penelope to drop her guarded, popular-girl persona and be more open with him. An important part of this is their shared Halloween homeless protest. This well timed, satirical approach to their different forms of struggle, one driven by choice and the other by systemic poverty facilitates an initial bond that transcends their cultural differences.

When Junior uses satire to frame his poverty such as wearing his father's vintage polyester suit to the winter formal, he subverts the trope of a sad and tragic Indian. He makes joke out of his circumstances and avoids becoming an object of pity. This way humour helps in creating an authentic bond, that transcends the socioeconomic status.

Junior's most vital tool is his cartooning. When words fail to capture the complexity of his dual life, his drawings act as a visual punchline. These cartoons serve as a bridge that requires no cultural translation, allowing his peers to see his perspective clearly. Junior states, "I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited. If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning. But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it." (Alexie 4).

Junior explains the necessity of this creative outlet, "I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats" (Alexie 13). Through these lifeboats, Junior uses satire to cope with the guilt of being a part-time Indian while successfully communicating his reality to a white audience. By the end of his journey, humour has proven to be the multitool that helps him find a middle ground between two worlds.

### Cartoons as social language

In the novel, Juniors move to Reardan is marked by a sense of isolation. His drawings became the primary method of communication when words fail to capture the complexity of his dual life. The drawings serve as a social language that allows him to navigate the friction of moving between reservation and predominantly white school.

For Junior, drawing is not just a hobby; it is a necessity for survival. He views his cartoons as talking in a way that speech cannot always accomplish. Junior struggles with stutter and lisp which he got from his birth, often leading to bullying or calling retard on the reservation. Living with physical challenges and a stutter, Junior finds that his drawings allow him to express his internal world without the threat of being mocked for how he speaks.

He uses satire and visual storytelling to process the immense guilt and pain of not belonging to both the world, the struggle of being a part time Indian. He framed his struggles, the struggles in the reservation, his family's poverty, and his own medical issues like suffering from hydrocephalus through a humorous and satirical lens, he tries to make them manageable. This can be seen as a way of processing his grief under relief theory of Freud.

"Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor". (Alexie 20) Junior believes that while spoken languages like English or Spanish are understood only by certain groups, a picture is universal. Every person, regardless of their background, can look at a drawing of a flower and understand what it is. His cartoons are universal and can transcend the barriers of the language and culture.

Junior views his art as his only chance to escape the reservation. He looks at different brown people who are rich and famous and notice that they are artist. He draws parallels to them and hopes that his talent as a cartoonist will help him forge a different future for himself. His sister who also has an artistic talent fail to utilise it and falls prey to the reservation system. In the case of Junior, he is using it to navigate the societal complexities.

"So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation". (Alexie 13)

Through his drawings, Junior humanizes himself to others. For instance, his cartoons of his parents' unfulfilled dreams or the differences between white/Indian life allow him to share his vulnerability, which helps turn him from a curiosity into a relatable individual.

Thus, cartoons serve as a multipurpose tool for Junior, helping him to navigate his hardships and making him one among both reservation and Rearden. It helps to make his vulnerabilities his strength and help him make friends.

### CONCLUSION

The conclusion of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* serves as a final testament to the transformative power of humour and art as instruments of resilience and bridge-building. For Arnold "Junior" Spirit, these are not merely personality traits but are essential survival strategies. Junior's journey from the Wellpinit reservation to Reardan High School is marked by a significant shift in how he asserts his presence. Through humour, Junior doesn't just fit into Reardan; he recalibrates its social hierarchy.

Junior's cartooning functions as a universal language that transcends the cultural and socioeconomic barriers. He draws because words are often too limited or unpredictable, especially given his childhood struggles with a stutter and lisp. His cartoons act as a visual punchline that requires no cultural translation, allowing his white classmates to see the reality of reservation life. This visual medium humanizes Junior, transforming him into a relatable individual with a shared human experience.

In his relationship with Penelope, humour serves as the foundation that breaks through the barrier of her popularity. By using satire to address dark topics like bulimia and systemic poverty, Junior creates a safe space for authentic connection. Ultimately, humour and cartooning prove to be the ultimate multitools in Junior's life. They allow him to find a middle ground between the reservation and Reardan, enabling him to stay afloat amidst profound personal and communal grief.

By the novel's end, Junior has not only survived the friction of his dual existence but has thrived, using his lifeboats to forge a new path that honours both his indigenous heritage and his individual ambitions. His story reinforces that creativity and wit are not just forms of expression but are fundamental acts of defiance against a world designed for him to fail.

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