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## Media, Language and Cultural Transformation in Alexie's *Flight*: A Study of Globalization

### Abstract:

*Globalization is a multidimensional phenomenon that has reshaped all the spheres of life and culture. This article explores how language and media have been treated in the cultural dimension of globalization that has had a transforming effect on the lives of the masses of a marginalized group of Native Americans in Alexie's Flight that demonstrates the cultural transformation of the Native Americans under white discursive practices. Manfred B. Steger's theorization serves as a basis for this study to find out how Native Americans are culturally transformed under the ever-increasing influence of globalization. In this process, language has lost its value at an official and cultural level. Alexie's Flight demonstrates the cultural transformation in the Native Americans. This text is about the white discursive practices affecting Native American culture.*

### Key Words:

Globalization, Language, Culture, Transformation, Native American Literature

### Introduction

The ideology of a nation is lived through the culture of the society. Culture is an umbrella term that includes language, environment, religion, media, education and certain conventions. Globalization has made different countries co-exist in a favourable environment, but in the process of globalization, culture is bound to go through changes. [Robertson \(1992\)](#) uses the term "Glocalization" for the merged interaction of different cultures across countries where culture takes a new shape and value. In the very process of glocalization, the purist picture of culture is modified. Language, being an important entity of culture, represents the heritage and ideology of a nation. The process of glocalization tends to deteriorate marginalized languages. Flight (2013) depicts how the deterioration of language results in the loss of native ideology and culture. It not only weakens the survival of culture but also mars the shape of real culture. Language holds the ideas, beliefs and wisdom of any nation, which are the core assets. Globalization does not propose a balanced space for every language, which is making many languages of the third world getting faded from the world map. Globalization has been experienced by the people living in different parts of the world differently. It has profusely affected the lives of the people on many levels. Globalization has affected the lives of those belonging to h marginalized strata of life. This is the core issue this research deals with, shedding light also on the identity crises faced by the affectees.

### Theoretical Framework

[Manfred Steger \(2013\)](#) studies the interrelation between culture and globalization. He supports his theory of globalization with Benjamin Barber's theory as well. [Barber \(1995\)](#) speaks of the cultural similarity that precedes acculturation, where the weaker nations have to leave their cultural baggage behind. He in *Jihad vs McWorld* (1995) terms the propaganda of the west as cultural imperialism, which he calls 'McWorld'. [Steger](#)

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(2013), discussing this idea of McWorld, observes that this process of McDonaldization is discursive and manipulative in nature. It is linked with the financial interests of America. Commercial purpose and agendas are right at the back of this practice of McWorld. According to Barber, such common interest has been inculcated in the minds of the world through different mediums such as videos, brands, music, TV shows, theatre, books, theme restaurants and theme parks to develop the common sense of interest in America's own culture, making it an Americanized world. Benjamin discusses the aftereffects of cultural imperialism, which, as Steger (2013) argues, incites resistance on cultural and political levels. He specifically refers to the idea of Jihad that seems to counter the homogenization the globalization is producing and spreading around the globe. Benjamin, thus analyzing the future, asserts that such repulsion and rejection of cultural universalization make Jihad and McWorld a sort of warfare of cultures that vie for the throne of success with the aid of popularity tactics.

The third perspective that runs contrary to the above theories is, according to [Steger \(2013\)](#), the view of Francis Fukuyama. He terms him as one of the optimistic hyperglobalizers. He discusses the viewpoint of Fukuyama, who does not seem to have any issue with the sameness, as he elaborated in the following line, yet they think such similarity is confusing the idea of Americanization of the entire globe with expanding democratic tendencies, apparently, oriented towards freer market. Optimistic hyperglobalizers believe that the inter-relation of cultures are actually resulting in more harmony and sameness of culture. They think it a productive effort of brand making countries to homogenize the politically weaker countries for the “mutual good”. (p. 83). [Steger \(2013\)](#) believes that the homogenization of culture is actually quite the opposite of the elimination of the other's cultural values as he states that homogenization is not excluding diversity from the picture. Both of the phenomena have their own mechanisms.

## The Role of Language

[Steger \(2013\)](#) has analyzed two effects of globalization. One is the declaration of one common language throughout the globe, which can create ease and efficiency in communication. Another aspect is the overshadowing of the other languages as they lose their importance, essence and prominence which they hold within themselves. There are five variables that resulted out of research at the Globalization Research Center at the University of Hawai'i, which [Steger \(2013\)](#) also mentioned in his book:

1. Homogenization is actually making the other minor languages lose their worth globally.
2. The pace of migration over the globe is increasing with the passage of time which is affecting languages.
3. The leisure and tourism organizations and the different workshops for learning the dominating language is also quite in fashion
4. The internet, which possesses English as its language, is making people aware of it more. People of other languages want to acquire English for developing human-computer interaction better.
5. English and other languages are being highly dominating the research paradigm.

[Steger \(2013\)](#) supports the fact that the number of languages that are being spoken has decreased from 14,500 to 7000 till the year 2000. 80% of the data provided on the internet is in the English language. The Internet has become a grand medium for knowledge, study programs, entertainment, research writing and communicating. There has also been a prediction that the language usage rate will decline by 50% by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a huge medium affects cultural promotion and contributes to the lack of need for using other languages. The most usable languages of today's world are English, Chinese and Spanish, but English here is dominating the rest of the two languages. The chain of globalization, which has been strengthening by a common language of English, is also becoming a source of making other languages and hence other cultures extinct.

## Analysis of Flight

*The flight* is about the transformation of a character, Zits, through different times. His character develops as he shifts from one character to another, changing identities from Native American to Western white identities. Through the transformation, the truth of his identity and historical events gets revealed to him. The novel accounts for the trail of losses that Zits had as a kid and as a marginal entity in dominantly white America.

## Attitude towards Globalization

Alexie represents the hegemonic attitude of American ideology towards the marginalized identities in *Flight*. The representation of such an attitude accounts for the sense of discrimination. However, Alexie throws lights on the inevitable and irrecoverable loss which globalization is bringing. The attitude of Alexie towards globalization changes eventually with the development of the novel. Zits, who was very resentful towards the whites, seems flexible and tolerant at the end of the novel. The transformation of Zits into different characters is Alexie's way of putting him into different mindsets to let him experience various dimensions of globalization and its effects on the indigenous culture. Zits' acceptance of White foster parents at the end of the novel connotes Alexie's acceptance of globalization. The characters in *Flight* are conscious of the insecurity, sense of homelessness and rootlessness. Alexie, in his novel, suggests reconciliation which is another aspect we witness in *Flight*. Reconciliation is an act of adopting the cultural values of Whites. Reconciliation is the way Alexie suggests in order to adopt global changes. Zits tries to come up with the terms of his previous life after acknowledging that it is necessary to get along in order to survive better. *Flight* passes on the message that the best enemy of brutality is the best possible comprehension of oneself and dealing with it. Alexie suggests that it is important to get along in the global world at many levels while coming up with a way of survival by adopting other cultures keeping your own by yourself. Hence acknowledging the injustice and violence on Native Americans was also an important aspect as Zits becomes hopeful after getting to know the whole historical and current violence.

## Cultural Transmutation through Language

[Rainwater \(1999\)](#) throws light on the importance of Native American fiction as a counter-discourse. Native American fiction supports their belief system, discourse and produces counter-discourse against the stereotypical notions of Americans. Native American fiction treats language as a 'medicine'. Steger (2013) states that politically weaker languages are getting faded away by the stronger ones. In the novel, Zits has been forced to greet in the English language without giving a second thought and flexibility to his own language. The foster father scolds him, "I'm going to say good morning one more time. And if you don't return the favour, you don't get to eat breakfast." Zits replies with sheer indifference as if he himself has accepted the biased approach of others toward him. The different language, which is the real Indian language, has been introduced in the eleventh chapter of the novel, where Zits wakes up to be in an Indian tribe. "I don't hear any of them speaking English. I don't know what Indian language they are speaking. I can't understand it, but all of them are speaking it" (p.33). The reason Zits cannot understand the native language and relate himself with the native Americans is the lack of interaction with the real culture, character and language. [Vizenor \(1994\)](#) mentions the change of language and its effects, quoting the experiences of Eliza Morrison, a mixed-blood who finds it really difficult to express the alien life she had been living. Despite having a Native Chippewa language, her family had to take English classes. She states the fact of the gradual spread of English over the years: "Thirty years ago, about two out of every ten Indians could speak English. Now three-fourth of them can speak English" (p. 272). This is also a great loss that many Native Americans have been going through in the process of globalization. The alienation of Zits from the Native American language is evidence of Steger's (2013) observation that the minor languages are fading from the world's map of languages hence contributing to homogeneity instead of diversity.

## Discursive Impact of Media and IT

Media and the influence of IT lie at the core of globalization. The culture of Native Americans has been confined to mere libraries and history books, whereas culture would rather be lived rather than preserved in books. Steger (2013) is of the view that the media has been pregnant with trendy commercials and American TV shows taking over all the channels and news. This is also a way of homogenization where the American ads and TV shows dominate the air time and do not let any other news or culture appear. Zits complains about not hearing anything about Native Americans neither on TV nor in newspapers. “Justice never said anything about the smell of old-time Indians. I never read anything about this smell. I never saw a television show that mentioned it” (p. 34).

At another event, Zits tries to pull the trigger at the newspaper and aim at George Bush, 43<sup>rd</sup> U.S President, “Then we tape up newspaper and magazine photos of people we hate, like George W. Bush and Cheney and Michael Jackson and that British dude from *American Idol*, and I practice shooting at them with the empty gun. *Click, click, click*” (p., 18). Western newspapers never cover the minorities in the country, which makes Zits resentful. The resentment can be interpreted in two ways. First, if towards the Western leaders or the State, which doesn’t acknowledge the Red Americans or doesn’t give space for practising their rights and cultures. The other interpretation of Zits’ resentfulness is upon media which never covered their stories and people. Zits’ alienation from his native people because he never read or watched anything about them supports Steger’s observation that media could mark “Americanization” by “mindless” (Steger, 2003, p.76) TV programmes and game shows which are moulding the identities and mindset. The growing relationship between media and entertainment is resulting in characters like Zits and his father, whose culture needs to get acknowledged, or else it would eventually fade away. The solution given by [Srinivasan \(2018\)](#) suggests that if the Natives are given a role in technological decision making in the project of globalization with its manipulative thrust, it may be lesser prejudiced toward the marginalized groups.

## Transformed Extreme Scenarios

Extremism from the marginalized in *Flight* shows the rebuttal against the system that is working for the extermination of the minorities. Alexie externalizes the fact that the relation between the Western entities and third world entities reflect extremism. According to Alexie, it is a two-way relationship: one act of extremism instigates the other. Such tension is also hard to manage under global changes. In flight, the extremely brutal treatment of the state towards the Natives triggers the intense breakdown of fire in the bank by Zits. In *Flight*, extremism prevails in the very character of Zits. He is resentful towards everyone. The horrible experiences he had while living in foster houses made him quite bitter in his language and manner. His resentful attitude is not only for Whites but extended towards Natives as well, and he finds “all of them are assholes.” (p. 15) When Zits gets transformed into the Native American, he has an extreme sense of inferiority which makes him behave in extreme anger. He misbehaves in response to the kind and pitiful behaviour of a White couple, and his “anger is never added to the anger. It multiplies.” (p. 74) Extreme attitude towards natives of other nations gets the best out of it through the character of Art when he asks Hank (Zits) to shoot the already dead Red Indian. At another moment, Zits’ transformed character into a White cop has been asked by his fellow White member to shoot the already dead Indian. His fellow cop, Art, gives him an option to either kill or to be killed. Zits questions the killing of someone when “he’s already dead. You can’t kill him twice.” (p. 29). The reason Art gives him is quite inhumane. He doesn’t want to be part of killing alone, so he involves his partner: “I want us to be in this one together” (p. 29).

This barbaric act was justified by Art as a weapon and excuse of war as he says, “We’re at war. We’re soldiers. And soldiers have to do some tough things. That’s why we’re soldiers. And some of the things we have to do, they hurt us...” (p. 31). The illusion of war and the higher aim is the justification of the violence. What is noteworthy here is the comparison Zits made of Justice and Art’s reason for violence. “Art and Justice fight

on opposite sides of the war, but they sound exactly like each other. How can you tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys when they say the same things?" (p. 31).

The character of Zits starts realizing in the later chapters that violence is not the answer and justification of any injustice which has been happened to Native Americans. In chapter no. 8, the Battle of Bighorn of 1876 is weaved where the extremism of Whites was being expressed by Zits, who has been transformed into the Native American voiceless kid: "They'll be slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry soldiers. They'll be packed into train cars and shipped off to reservations. And they'll starve in winter camps near iced-over rivers. The children are going to be kidnapped and sent off to boarding schools. Their hair will be cut short, and they will be beaten for speaking their tribal languages. They'll be beaten for dancing and singing the old-time Indian songs" (p. 37).

Such an act of brutality is mere extremism at the end of the US army. At the war of 1876, the need for revenge related to the brutal treatment of whites with the Indians gets its expression when an Indian grandmother "strips off his clothes. She wants him to be naked and ashamed in the afterlife. And now she cuts off his penis and stuffs it into his mouth....a girl, maybe ten years old, digging at a dead soldier's eyes" (p. 40), where Zits father took his arm and presented him a white kid along with the knife to slit his throat like he had been treated. He recalls the time near a riverside when he was a victim of an insensitive behavior of a White soldier who cut his throat, grabbed him by his hair and slit his neck with a dagger: "And now my father wants revenge. He wants me to want revenge" (p. 41). This sense of revenge and bloodshed in return for the bloodshed has been represented by Alexie as a question in front of us. In the same chapter, Zits recalls his foster father raping him to bleed and left him alone in a dark dunk. Zits' reflection over the process of spiral revenge is actually the reflection of Alexie over the "revenge (as) a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle" (p. 42). Such extremism of violence at the end of Whites is being questioned along with the need for revenge in the form of violence by the Native Americans where the relation between the two in a global sphere is inevitable.

### **Identities in Crisis**

Western standards homogenize the culture-scape leaving no room for the expression of the margins. In *Flight*, the question and interrogation upon Native's ideology and Zits' inability to know his native language prove the effects of homogeneity by a condition which one has to fulfil to survive. Alexie resists the totalizing homogenization. *The flight* also represents the lack of the sense of belonging of Red Indians to their religion. Steger (2013) gives the outlook of loss of the culture of a marginalized one when it interacts with another one in authority and majority. Such interaction makes the other culture lose its essence. The marginalized tend to grow up with a sense of homelessness and insecurity related to their survival. In the novel *Flight*, Alexie externalizes the fact of fear of unconscious and sense of rootlessness in the form of Character Zits. As at the start of the novel, Zits expresses his feelings about the loss of identity while he introduces himself, saying that "[m]y real name isn't important" (p. 1). Just like in the stories of natives told by the white where the real identities of the natives remain concealed, throughout the novel, we don't get to know his real name though he transforms himself into different identities. Not only Zits was aware of the insignificance of his identity, which made him care less about his name, but he was actually ashamed of his acne-fied identity as he says, "You can die of shame. And, trust me, my zit-shame is killing me" (p. 2). The shame which Zits is talking about here is not the shame of acne but the shame of his identity, which makes him suffer and wander about as a nomad. He could not find himself or his identity though he wanders from place to place. This actually suggests that it is nowhere to be found. He himself exclaims, "I've lived in twenty different foster homes and attended twenty-two different schools" (p. 3). The continuous shifting of Zits from one place to another suggests how he was lost and could not feel a sense of home and security.

### **Changes in Lifestyle**

Globalization strains the characters to compromise their identities in the new culture and environment.

Analyzing *Flight* suggests that despite a costly phenomenon, it offers transformation for survival. The transformation of Zits into different White and Native American characters reflects the compulsive cultural changes they have to accept. [Hale \(2002\)](#) discusses the poor schooling and academic conditions of Native Americans. Boarding schools have been set for Natives where White education and old syllabus has been taught to them over generations. The White culture and Christian approach have been taught in these schools accruing no productivity for Natives. [Rosenthal \(2012\)](#) discusses the city life of Native Americans and their re-imagined identity. The Natives are still searching for the reasons for dropping their manner of lives. The White nation makes it quite ambiguous for Natives to live in an alien manner. The strict imposition of a certain lifestyle makes Zits uncomfortable and cranky. Hence *Flight* mourns the lack of space for Native Americans for living their own code of life. According to [Loomba \(2015\)](#), the colonizers reconstructed the colonized in a violent way. Such loss of consciousness gets into the shape of a white-washed identity. The lifestyle, the education which Zits is being offered, never turns out to be good for him. The Western mindset always tries to mould the identity as in chapter Nine; he recalls the time when his mother leaves him at school, giving him hope for better learning and getting friends, which he later declares “was not good” as he “never made friends ... didn’t learn much” (p. 87). [Fenelon \(2017\)](#) points out the discriminatory practices directed against Native Americans to uproot them from their essence and make them practice the new projected lifestyle.

### Transformation as an Outcome of Cultural Imperialism

Transformations and revolutions, howsoever potentially fruitful they seem, have their own associated costs. Transformation is an inevitable aspect of globalization which, according to Steger (2013), has had a negative impact too. It has been detrimental to many a community. In particular, Native Americans had to leave behind their name, nation, culture and identity in the name of globalization. The mainstream White culture of America did not let them practice their culture. Assimilating anyone’s culture is actually not a global step; it is quite anti-global because globalization tends to provide the canvas for multi-cultures to work together. They have been transformed into reservations making them aliens. Later they got transformed into boarding schools where the Native American literature was not given any space. They have been asked to cut their hair due to the “rules and regulations” of white culture. Casinos and bars were made more easily accessible than books. Sherman Alexie is of the view that diversity and embracing new values is actually not an option but a need. However, he also throws light on the sense of loss one feels while adopting these new notions. It is in line with [Lim’s \(2006\)](#) observation that the discursive practices on the part of dominant forces may be considered the point of departure by the natives in rewriting the history and reclaiming their identities. In *Flight*, we see a character getting transformed into multiple identities, a blend of Native American and White identities. Seeing the camps of natives, Zits thinks: “All of them are going to start drinking booze. And their children will drink booze. And their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will drink booze. And one of those great-grandchildren will grow up to be my real father, the one who decided that drinking booze was more important than being my father—the one who abandoned my mother and me” (p. 37).

### Conclusion

Alexie questions the way globalization has strained the Native American communities’ cultures and identities. But he is not evasive: he suggests to come to terms with globalization maintaining their traditional cultural values. Media has been a great medium to connect the world and support globalization, but it also played a crucial role in modifying the true cultural picture of the marginalized. Having a hegemonic control, media molded and reconstructed the truth of identities and life accounts of the characters of *Flight*. The dominance of the powerful nations over the weaker ones also came to the fore. Power politics is there in a globalized world. The traditional political systems are tumbling down, giving way to the supra-territorial political paradigms. Media is helping characters developing their relation, which is deteriorated in the long run. It was also crystallized from the analysis of the novel that the people in the locales had to deal with a crisis of identity and

their native language. The globalized world demanded them to be globalized citizens paying whatever cost that accompanied this new citizenship. They lost their identities, language and individuality in the process. They were faced with two options: either to adopt the new ways or to perish in history.



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