



# Two Worlds, One Identity: Postcolonial Reading of Space in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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| Article Info                                                                                                                                        | Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
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| Received: 2026 - 06- 01<br>Revised: 2026 06-18<br>Accepted: 2026 06-30                                                                              | <i>This study examines how the reservation shape's identity in Sherman Alexie's <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> (2007). Rather than treating the setting as a passive background, this paper contributes to postcolonial spatial studies by showing how the reservation actively constructs identity before any physical movement takes place. This qualitative study applies Sara Upstone's concepts of "place" and "space" to analyze the novel's dialogues, narratives, and events. This specific framework reveals how colonial structures turn the reservation into a fixed "place" of poverty and isolation that Junior internalizes. However, the analysis demonstrates that Junior's relocation to Reardan transforms this restrictive environment into a flexible "space" for self-definition. In conclusion, the study argues that the reservation is not permanently limiting, but can be transformed into a dynamic environment through individual agency and resistance.</i> |
| <b>Keywords:</b><br>Postcolonialism, Sara Upstone, Sherman Alexie, Space, <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i> .                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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## 1. Introduction

Identity is often shaped by the social and historical conditions in which individuals live, especially in contexts marked by colonial influence. Postcolonialism provides a framework for understanding how colonial structures outlast the physical presence of the colonizer (Rahariyoso, 2014). Within these remaining colonial spaces, inherited systems continue to restrict access to power,

resources, and self-determination (Collins, 2018; Kendall, 2012). This ongoing subjugation is especially true for Indigenous communities living as minoritized populations within their own ancestral lands, often referred to as the Fourth World (Tripathy, 2009). For instance, land on Native American reservations does not fully belong to Indigenous people, except for free lands or lands directly purchased by the tribe.

This situation reflects the major injustice experienced by the original inhabitants of the United States, whose rights over their own land were largely taken away (Milandri, 2024). Although the U.S. government presents Indian reservations as a means of preserving Native American culture and identity, the reservation system actually isolated and separated Native Americans from the wider society (Chang et al., 2014). The boundaries imposed by colonial powers have obscured Indigenous understandings of their own identity and ways of life that existed prior to colonialism (Adzhani, 2014). As a result, identity in postcolonial contexts is not formed freely, but within systems that already define and restrict possibilities.

To understand this restriction, postcolonial geography distinguishes between "place" and "space" as active agents in identity formation. According to Sara Upstone (2009), a geographic environment is never a passive background. Instead, colonial powers attempt to fix an environment into a rigid, controlled "place" by imposing boundaries that dictate social hierarchies and limit individual opportunity. Conversely, "space" represents a fluid, unstructured domain where individuals can resist these boundaries and reclaim self-definition (Sulistyo, 2020). When marginalized individuals internalize a rigid "place," their self-understanding becomes limited.

However, by exercising agency, they can transform that confining environment into a dynamic "space" of resistance. In Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), these issues are represented through the experiences of Junior, a Native American teenager who grows up in a reservation and later attends a predominantly white school. The novel portrays how Junior navigates different environments while trying to understand who he is. Before leaving the reservation, Junior has already experienced poverty, limitation, and struggle, which shape the initial formation of his identity. His movement to a new environment then adds another layer of experience, placing him between two different worlds. This shows that identity is not only shaped by movement, but is already influenced by earlier conditions.

Previous studies on this novel have often focused on identity formation through the contrast between the reservation and the outside world. For example, Linn Lundin (2024) applies a postcolonial perspective to this novel by focusing on concepts such as the "Other," liminality, mimicry, and hybridity. The study highlights the protagonist's development as he moves from a school in the Spokane reservation to a predominantly white school in Reardan. This transition exposes

him to racism, social inequality, and a divided sense of identity, while also affecting his relationships with family and friends. Overall, the study emphasizes identity conflict as a result of navigating between two contrasting social and cultural environments. Movement from the reservation to a new environment is commonly seen as the main factor that drives identity change. While this perspective provides useful insights, it tends to treat the reservation as a passive background.

Previous studies that use Upstone's spatial theory mostly focus on destination cities as utopian urban spaces, while analyses of origin locations as fixed places are relatively rare. For example, Zietha Arlamanda Asri (2025) examines the construction of urban space in James Joyce's "A Little Cloud" from a postcolonial perspective. The study shows how London, initially imagined as a utopian city of economic growth and industrial progress, becomes a site of colonial spatial control marked by boundaries that separate the English and the Irish. It highlights the tension between utopian and dystopian representations of urban space, as well as forms of resistance such as displacement and identity transformation in public spaces.

Another previous study conducted by Azizatur Rahma & Muhammad Nur Hanif (2019) discusses how space is divided into two opposing areas, the cage and the outside world, which reflect the relationship between colonial power and resistance. These spaces are not only physical locations but also shape different identities, where the cage is linked to submissive characteristics and the outside space is associated with dominance and control. The study also shows that controlling space means controlling identity, since those inside the cage are shaped and regulated through that spatial boundary. However, resistance in the story does not lead to a fixed new structure or nation-state, but instead suggests freedom as a collective movement beyond rigid boundaries, questioning the need for a permanent spatial form in postcolonial struggle.

Additionally, a previous study was discussed by Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari (2022) of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of third space, identity is understood as a combination of the past and the present that emerges within the "in-between" space between colonizer and colonized cultures. Hybrid identity is formed through the negotiation of different cultural experiences, showing that identity is not fixed or purely original. However, the discussion mainly emphasizes the interaction between past and present experiences in shaping identity.

In contrast, Sara Upstone's book *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009) expands this idea by arguing that identity is fluid and continuously changing through spatial experiences. She also states that the concept of "post-space" goes further than Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the "third space." While the third space mainly focuses on a shift in awareness or perspective, post-space views this change in consciousness as the beginning of active resistance and real transformation in physical and social reality (Upstone 2009). As a result, the role of the reservation itself as an active space in shaping identity is often overlooked.

Therefore, this study takes a different position by focusing on the reservation as a central space that already shapes identity before any movement occurs.

To understand this, it is important to consider the role of space in shaping identity. Identity refers to how individuals understand who they are (Vignoles, 2017), and is shaped through relationships and social positioning (Buckingham, 2008). These processes are closely connected to space, since space determines the conditions in which individuals interact, experience limitation, and construct meaning. According to Sara Upstone, space is something that has not yet been fixed or fully defined. It only gains meaning once humans create boundaries and give structure to it (Sulistyo, 2020). Therefore, space should not be seen as a passive setting, but as an active element that influences identity formation.

Using Sara Upstone's theory of space, this article fills the existing gap by re-examining the reservation. Rather than treating it as a passive background, this study shows that the reservation is an active and dynamic space that plays a central role in constructing, negotiating, and transforming identity. Junior's identity is not formed solely by his movement into a new environment, but has already developed through the conditions he experiences within the reservation. At the same time, his ability to adapt shows that identity is not only shaped by previous and present conditions, but can also continue to develop in the future as individuals move through and experience different spaces. Through this perspective, identity becomes an ongoing process rather than a final or stable condition.

The research objectives of this study are as follows: (1) To explain how the reservation functions as a fixed "place" that limits Junior's identity. (2) To examine how Junior reclaims the reservation by transforming it from a fixed "place" into a dynamic "space" that shapes his identity.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine how space shape's identity in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In literary studies, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to systematically interpret narrative structures, cultural contexts, and ideological meanings within a text (Furidha, 2023). This method views the novel as a site where social realities and spatial politics are actively constructed and negotiated. To ensure analytical consistency and interpretive validity, Sara Upstone's (2009) spatial concepts were operationalized into three distinct analytical categories used to evaluate the extracted text.

The concept of "place" was applied to textual units mapping colonial control, isolation, and limitations on the reservation. The concept of "space" was utilized for passages representing the blurring of boundaries, individual agency, and moments where rigid environments begin to open up. Finally, "post-space" was used to categorize scenes depicting active resistance, physical transformation, and fluid self-definition where Junior actively reconfigures his identity. This

categorization keeps the analysis focused and tied directly to the text.

The primary data of this study were collected from Sherman Alexie's novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that consist of narrative descriptions, dialogues, and events that represent the condition of the reservation, Junior's movement between spaces, and his identity development. The study employed qualitative descriptive method steps that involve organizing, summarizing, and interpreting data collected from various sources through continuous data collection until saturation is reached. The analysis is inductive, meaning conclusions are developed based on the collected data (Furidha, 2023). The data include depictions of poverty, limitation, and social life within the reservation, as well as scenes that show Junior's physical movement and internal conflict when navigating different environments.

Secondary data are collected from books, journal articles, and other relevant sources related to postcolonialism, identity, and spatial theory, particularly Sara Upstone's *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), to support and strengthen the analysis by providing theoretical explanations and critical perspectives that help interpret how space influences Junior's identity formation and transformation throughout the novel.

The data analysis follows a systematic qualitative framework adapted from the framework method of thematic analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). First, during the data familiarization phase, the novel was read closely several times to locate and extract quotes matching the selection criteria. Second, during the coding phase, these extracted passages were sorted directly into the theoretical categories of place, space, or post-space.

Third, the coded data then underwent closer interpretation to uncover how Junior negotiates his identity, moving from structural limitation to personal agency. Lastly, the final interpretations were cross-referenced continuously with the novel itself to ensure accuracy and protect the validity of the textual evidence.

### 3. Result and Discussion

After conducting an in-depth reading of this novel through Sara Upstone's theory of space and analyzing several previous studies, the researcher has discovered several results to fulfill the objectives of this study.

#### ***The reservation acts as a fixed "place" that limits identity***

The reservation functions as a highly controlled environment that actively shapes individual identity. Rather than acting as an accidental backdrop, the setting is a structurally engineered mechanism that normalizes poverty and generational isolation. Upstone (2009) defined colonization turns abstract concepts into physical reality, allowing the ruling power to assert total dominance over both the land and its inhabitants. This total control over the colony affects more than just the land and the rights of native people, it also shapes and forces specific ways of

defining who they are. The reservation is not only a physical location but a system that continuously reproduces limitation and inferiority. Excerpt from the text, this idea is clearly reflected in the condition of the reservation:

*"...but I am really just a poor-ass reservation kid living with his poor-ass family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation" (p. 14)*

*"But we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are." (p. 20)*

*"No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor." (p. 20)*

*"...there's probably no place more isolated than my reservation." (p. 37)*

*"My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from." (p. 38)*

These dialogues show how the reservation operates as a closed and limiting system. Poverty, isolation, and lack of access are not temporary conditions, they are normalized and repeated across generations. Junior does not simply live in poverty, he is taught to understand himself through poverty. Fixed "place" appears natural and permanent, as if it has always existed in that way. However, this sense of permanence is misleading, because it actually hides the historical and political forces that shape it. The strategy of natural control is presented as a constructed system that was not initially recognized by the native people (Ernawati et al., 2018). In other words, what looks "normal" is often the result of imposed structures of power. This rigid construction of place is central to colonial control.

By fixing a territory and defining its meaning, colonial systems are able to regulate not only land, but also the people who live within it (Upstone, 2009). As a result, individuals begin to internalize these limitations, accepting them as part of their identity. According to Sar (2023), chaos is created as a colonial strategy to establish boundaries and rules by promising a better life and improved conditions for the colonized. However, this promise of a better life remains a utopian space that never truly comes into reality, as it only benefits the colonizers while causing suffering for the colonized people.

Upstone (2009) argues that colonial systems depend on rigid boundaries to maintain power. These boundaries make a territory appear "absolute," leaving no room for change or negotiation. When this happens, alternative identities and possibilities are erased or ignored. This can be seen in the institutional control within the reservation:

*"But the Indian Health Service funded major dental work only once a year..." (p. 9)*

*"Our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did..." (p. 9)*

*"We were supposed to make you give up being Indian... We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture." (p. 42)*



Based on these dialogues, state control on the reservation goes beyond poverty, it also limits basic healthcare. This is clear in how the state-funded Indian Health Service rations vital dental work. Systems such as healthcare and education do not simply serve the community, they regulate it, instead they impose limitations and reinforce inequality. This unfair healthcare system shows a bigger effort to wipe out Native culture and independence. By treating everyone on the reservation the exact same way, the system reduces real people into flat stereotypes. As Upstone (2009) highlights, controlling space also means controlling identity. When people are trapped in a fixed place, they are forced into simplified categories that change how they see themselves and how others see them. This is evident in the psychological impact on Junior:

*"They dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got the chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams." (p. 18)*

*"And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor" (p. 20)*

*"The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up." (p. 49)*

The reservation does not just limit opportunities, it shapes belief. It creates a cycle where identity becomes tied to failure, and where hope feels unrealistic. This concept of a fixed space is embedded in society as something fixed, controlled, absolute, and natural (Atikurrahman, 2014). In this sense, the reservation functions as what Upstone (2009) describes as a fixed and "naturalized" space, one that hides its colonial origins while continuing to enforce limitations.

The fixed space is further exposed when Junior realizes that *"Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear."* (p. 213). The reservation functions as a fixed and controlled "place" that shapes and limits Junior's identity by normalizing poverty, isolation, and restricted opportunities. These conditions are continuously repeated, making them appear natural and leading Junior to internalize them as part of who he is. This shows that identity is not only formed individually, but is also strongly constructed through the spatial and social conditions in which a person lives.

### ***Reclaiming the reservation from fixed place to dynamic space***

The reservation is constructed with clear boundaries and restrictions, which shape how individuals see themselves and their possibilities. Descriptions of poverty, limited resources, and social expectations reflect how it operates as a fixed place that confines identity. However, identity is not entirely fixed within these structures. In the novel, Junior does not remain passive with the identity constructed by the colonizers for the people on the reservation, instead, he tries to break free from that fixed "place." Junior's desire to leave the reservation marks the

beginning of this shift:

*"So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation." (p. 12)*

*"I feel like I might grow up to be somebody important." (p. 12)*

*"No, if I don't go now, I never will." (p. 53)*

*"...but I am running away because I want to find something." (p. 53)*

*"I'm going to die if I don't leave." (p. 58)*

These statements show that Junior refuses to accept the fixed meaning of the reservation. He begins to imagine a different future, one that is not limited by his current environment. Upstone (2009) also emphasizes that reclaiming space is closely tied to resistance. It requires individuals to actively question and oppose the structures that define them. This resistance is not always grand or dramatic, it can appear in small, personal acts of defiance. She further explains that reclaiming space involves challenging the idea that a place is permanent or absolute. By exposing its constructed nature, individuals can begin to reshape it.

Life after "leaving" the reservation is not that easy. At Reardan, the white school where Junior studies, he faces many unpleasant experiences such as racism and bullying. However, these challenges do not make Junior give up, as shown in the following dialogues.

*"And a warrior isn't afraid of confrontation." (p. 94)*

*"I kept making list after list of the things that made me feel joy." (p. 179)*

*"I'm never going to quit living life this hard, you know? I'm never going to surrender to anybody."*

*Never, ever, ever." (p. 185)*

Junior's persistence encourages him to adapt to a new environment and way of life. As he becomes more involved in Reardan, he starts to experience a conflict within his identity, caught between his background as an Indian and his new position within a predominantly white school. The coexistence of these two identities places Junior in an in-between position, which Bhabha describes as hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). This is clearly reflected in Junior's experience:

*"I felt like two different people inside of one body." (p. 66)*

*"And once I arrived at Reardan, I became something less than less than less than Indian." (p. 85)*

*"I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other." (p. 121)*

*"Traveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger." (p. 121)*

The spatial and psychological fragmentation Junior experiences highlights



both the value and the limitations of traditional postcolonial frameworks. A study using Bhabha's theory conducted by Wahyuni et al. (2026) states that hybridity also shows how colonized people are neither fully like the colonizer nor fully able to maintain their original identity, resulting in a mixed identity. They also stated that hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, and the different no longer simply different. From this statement, hybridity suggests that identity is simultaneously similar and different, but never fully fixed in either category. It assumes that identity change is merely a mental or cultural reaction to navigating two contrasting environments, treating the reservation as a passive backdrop where identity conflict is merely suffered.

*"You can't just betray your tribe and then change your mind ten minutes later... There was no way to turn around, even if I wanted to." (p. 60)*

*"Nope, they were calling me by my Reardan name." (p. 145)*

*"...I was still the kid who had betrayed the tribe. And that couldn't be forgiven." (p. 161)*

*"...so I would always be an outsider." (p. 181)*

These lines show how Junior struggles to define himself because he cannot fully belong to either the reservation or Reardan. However, treating Junior's condition purely as hybridity risks trapping his identity in permanent ambiguity. To move beyond the theoretical standstill, Sara Upstone's spatial theory shifts the focus from abstract hybridity to active spatial transformation. In her book, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), Upstone clarifies that while colonial systems attempt to fix an environment into an absolute, unchangeable "place" to assert total dominance over the land and its inhabitants, these spaces are never permanently frozen.

Junior's physical and symbolic movement breaks this colonial illusion. By refusing to let the reservation or Reardan dictate his boundaries, Junior shifts his environment from a restrictive place into a dynamic "space" characterized by fluidity and negotiation. He does not remain passive within identity ambiguity, instead, he actively uses his mobility to challenge the rigid definitions imposed on his world.

This transformation culminates in what Upstone defines as "post-space," a domain where fixed structures are replaced by flexible, shifting meanings, and identity is no longer imposed but created through interaction and reflection. The concept of post-space is no longer confined by rigid colonial boundaries, allowing it to become a new space that is fluid, hybrid, and open to change (Destriyadi, 2024). This shows that identity is not stable, but constantly changing as individuals move across different spaces. Through that, Junior demonstrates that what is initially a fixed place can be transformed into a dynamic space that enables growth and future possibilities, rather than leading to stagnation or identity loss. This is evident when

Junior realizes:

*"I was important to them. I mattered." (p. 209)*

*"I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness." (p. 213)*

*"I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants." (p. 214)*

This realization marks a crucial shift how Junior sees himself; he breaks out of the rigid boxes the system tried to force him into. He finally reclaims the reservation. By expanding his identity, he breaks the colonial binaries that sought to confine him. He successfully reclaims the reservation, no longer seeing it as a prison meant for disappearance, he views it as a valuable part of his identity, one that can change, grow, and help him survive. In this way, the reservation is no longer just a fixed "place." Through Junior's actions and perspective, it becomes part of a larger, dynamic "space" that he actively reshapes. Junior moves between rejection and acceptance, showing that identity is always being negotiated.

## 5. Conclusion

This study shows that Junior's identity is deeply shaped by his relationship with the reservation, first as a limiting fixed place, and later as a space he actively redefines. In line with Sara Upstone (2009), the reservation is not simply a physical location, but a constructed environment that reflects colonial power. It appears natural and permanent, yet it is built on systems that control opportunity, restrict movement, and impose narrow definitions of identity. As seen in Junior's early experiences, this "place" limits not only his material conditions, but also how he understands himself and his future. However, the study also finds that this fixed meaning is not absolute.

Through his decision to leave the reservation, Junior begins to challenge its authority and expose it as a constructed system. This moment marks a shift from "place" to "space", where meaning becomes flexible and open to reinterpretation. As Sara Upstone (2009) suggests, reclaiming space allows individuals to break away from imposed identities and create new possibilities. Junior's actions, his desire to escape, his refusal to give up, and his efforts to redefine his world, demonstrate this process of resistance and transformation. At the same time, this transformation is not simple or stable.

Junior's movement between the reservation and Reardan places him in an in-between position, where his identity becomes fluid and constantly negotiated. Rather than belonging fully to one side, he exists across multiple spaces, experiencing both acceptance and rejection. This reflects the idea that postcolonial identity is not fixed, but shaped through movement, contradiction, and interaction (Upstone, 2009).

In the end, Junior does not completely abandon the reservation, nor does he

fully assimilate into the white world. Instead, he develops a more complex and layered identity, one that connects him to multiple communities at once. This final position shows that identity is not determined by a single place, but formed through the ongoing process of navigating and reclaiming space. Therefore, this study concludes that the reservation, while initially functioning as a fixed and limiting place, can be transformed through individual agency into a dynamic space that enables growth, resistance, and self-definition. Junior's journey ultimately reflects the possibility of moving beyond imposed boundaries and constructing an identity that is fluid, cross-cultural, and continuously evolving.

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