

Sherman Alexie's "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian": A Narratological Analysis

Asad-Ullah

Anser Mahmood

Abstract

The present study pinpoints the actions that take place in Sherman Alexie's novel "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian" and facilitates the writer in his enterprise to construct a story. The analysis, incorporating qualitative study method, tends to depict as well as reflect significantly upon the key actions and their progress in the novel by employing the theory of narratology supported with A. J. Greimas' "Model of Actantial". Greimas reduces Vladimir Propp's seven spheres of action into six by identifying those actions as six actants, applicable to more convoluted and non-fictional works as well. This study, keeping in focus those actions that revolve around novel's protagonist Arnold Spirit (nick name: Junior), analyzes those contributing factors which make an action complete cogent and coherent. The study further explores that the contributing actors do not merely alter their roles quite frequently but also the axes they are working in now and then and how it happens that when an actor is playing a role in an action, the role of that actor is startlingly come apart not just into two actants but into two dissimilar axes as well in the same action.

Keywords: Actant, Acteurs, Action, Helper, Object, Opponent, Subject

1. Theoretical Framework

Narratology finds its roots in Structuralism, a 1950s French intellectual movement. The Structuralist theory of narratology develops from "certain elementary linguistic analogies" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 67), taking "much of its characters and some of its terminologies from linguistic theory" (Barry, 2005, p. 214). Narratology analyzes narratives from the standpoint of narrative's structures, "Narratology ... is not reading and elucidation of individual stories, but an effort to study the nature of "story" (p.

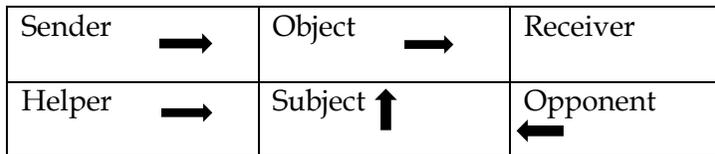
215). This French term “narratology” is coined by Franco Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov in his work named “Grammaire du Décaméron.” For him this word goes parallel with other terms such as sociology, biology, and others, referring to the science of narrative. Narratology as theory had made swift and noticeable advancement owing to the efforts of such narratologists as Barthes, Bremond, Genette, and Greimas, paying tribute to first contributors like Propp and Lévi-Strauss.

The study at hand takes Algirdas Julien Greimas’s proposed model of narratology known as “Model of Actantial” to examine the story of the work in focus thematically. To delineate, we can say that Greimas’ Model of Actantial, although inspired by Vladimir Propp (1970), offered a pragmatic structure of narrative by replacing Propp’s syntagmatic structure. Propp developed his model distinctively from folktales as he “focused on a single genre,” and was more concerned regarding fictional texts (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005, p. 68). In contrast, Greimas sought to put forward a typology of general roles to which the specified actors in narratives could be reduced. Greimas’ model intended to discover the structural attributes of not only fictional but non-fictional stories too. By doing so, “Greimas wants to describe the basic structure that allows meaning to emerge” (Bertens, 2002, p. 69). Greimas reduced Propp’s seven spheres of action into six and named them “actants.” It allows analyzing a story if proposed six actants are additionally categorized into three binary oppositions (given below) creating three axes as:

- Subject & Object
- Sender & Receiver
- Helper & Opponent

These pairs/axes are explicable, as Greimas “thinks regarding the relation between entities” and he is not much concerned about the character of entities in themselves (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 2005, p. 69). These six actants, six different elements which we come across in a story, are named as ‘acteurs (actors)’ while analyzing a story. Difference between “actant” and “acteur” is that one actant can be “manifested by more than one acteur” and one acteur can be “assigned to more than one actant” (Kenan, 2005, p. 35), though as Kenan cites Greimas that “both are conceived of as accomplishing or submitting to an act” (p. 34). “Subject” is something moving with a plan or aspiration toward

“object”. “Subject” is the “central element in the action of a story”, it is not compulsory though that subject should be a human being, and “object” is principally the “objective that the subject wants to achieve through the action”, something that subject wants to acquire (Bertens, 2002 p.69). This duo of Subject and Object creates “axis of desire” or what Bertens names as “a relationship of desire” (p. 69). That is the liaison between Subject and Object and the relation of desire, as Subject’s desire of Object gets the story going. Binary of Sender and Receiver creates the “Axis of Knowledge”; it is about communication as well. The sender is the initiator of the action, the one who establishes the links between Subject and Object, or makes Subject conscious regarding Object. The receiver holds the position of a force for which the entire action is being undertaken. The purpose of this axis is to communicate and then set off the action. The “Axis of Power” is maintained by the binary of “Helper” and “Opponent”. Helper, as evident from the name, is the one who assists Subject to healthily keep up that “relationship of desire”, Opponent is the one working to blight that relationship, “anything that presents an obstacle to achieving the ‘object’” (p. 70). All these actants work as:



It is not binding that everyacteur/actor in a story should be human, or play a particular role. In various instances, role shift occurs, for instance, Sender becomes Helper if that “relationship of desire” meets with a sound end. We may have to apply this model to a story more than once if the story is slightly convoluted. It is compulsory as to examine and label a character is not less messy, as Bertens makes his points by saying that often an acteurin “one sub-story functions as an ‘opposer’ operates as a ‘helper’ in another sub-story” (p. 70).

2. Analysis

The novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* covers not just a single action to apply a model on. There are many actions contributing in the core story, few are major, and the other are minor ones; the rationale here is to

analyze those major actions to see how those interlinked actions are contributing in one story. As the name indicates that novel focuses one person as this is about “a part-time Indian,” and that one person (the protagonist) is anticipated to come into sight as the “subject” of the novel. While applying the model, it becomes understandable that the protagonist is the “subject” but his aim at a point is not to struggle for the “object” however to support the “opponent”.

Junior is thought to “croak during the surgery” (Alexie, 2007, p. 2), initiating the action of the story. He is born with too much cerebral fluid inside his head; nature is proving itself a major obstruction in the relentless action of life. He survives even after surgery, but battles hardly finish that easily, after some time, he ends up having forty-two teeth rather than thirty-two. Here comes a new obstacle named “Indian Health Service”, offering funds once in a year for any medication. His parents settled on the choice to get all ten extra ten teeth removed at once because of the paucity of the funds, notwithstanding if it takes their son to death. The white doctor working there at health service gives Junior half the Novocain that he believes “Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did” (p. 2). Fortunately, he survives even after all that.

Junior (his inner strength) →	A normal life →	Junior
Rowdy, Cartoons →	Junior ↑	← Nature, authorities, society

The subject, the protagonist, Arnold Spirit is also identified as Junior, and the thing he wants to have is a normal life, like many of others. His appearance is ridiculous, and people on reservation identify him “a retard about twice a day” (p. 4). He draws cartoons, he feels important with a pen in his head, drawing cartoons takes him into the sphere of massive contentment which he feels that one day these cartoons will make him renowned and well-known. He survives after medication and overcomes nature (responsible for his abnormal birth) but is afraid to cope with the people around. Junior is found saying that when every child prefers to go outside, for him “it’s safer to stay at home” (p. 4). Rowdy, Junior’s violent best friend, here is the helper according to the model because whenever Junior is out, and wants to take part in something like others but is

scared, Rowdy is there to give confidence and always like “I’ll protect you” (p. 17)

The major action of the story begins when Junior joins freshman’s class at Wellpinit High School. There he, with his friend (helper in the previous action), is planning to play high school basketball and is very eager about school life, about books and learning. Somewhere he is conscious that “kids are going to give me crap for being so excited about school” (p. 28). He struggles with bone-crushing reality while in the hunt for hope. Lazy teachers, negligent management, even thirty years old books, the whole lot is making things go more and more complex. Mr. P, Junior’s scatterbrained and lazy teacher, passes a geometry book out. Junior grabs it eagerly, he is set to kiss that book, but he stops short when he finds “This book belongs to Agnes Adams” (p. 31) written inside front cover. Agnes Adams is the name of Junior’s mother, and she is in school for 30 years, he realizes same books are being taught at that institute and that he finds “absolutely saddest thing in the world” (p. 13). How are they expected to progress with the flow of time when, for decades, their educational system is investing nothing in furtherance of his people! After this, junior’s “hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud” (p. 31). In aggravation, he throws the book and breaks Mr. P’s nose, soon after, he is suspended from the school with all his dreams and hopes. At this point of action the acteurs come into view working like:

Junior’s inner strength →	Hope to be something →	Junior
	Junior ↑	Mr. P, System ←

Junior is the Subject in search of hope, he hopes to be something, and Object yet again is an abstract one. Anticipating his triumph, Subject joins the school, imagining education his Helper. It is Mr. P, acteur working as apparent Opponent, who is teaching what is worthless now. Alternatively, maybe the system working behind him, as unseen Opponent is blurring the course which Junior wants to travel. Realization of his unfulfilled hope makes Junior violent, and he attacks his apparent Opponent.

Action continues, and after few days Mr. P visits Junior's home, and Junior thinks he is for sure here to beat him up for what he did to him in the past. To Junior's surprise, he does not scold him but starts telling him other things. He confesses that what Junior did to him was correct to some extent, the syllabus they are teaching in Wellpinit is ineffectual that "the only thing you kids are being taught (here) is how to give up", the way Junior's sister Mary has given up, the way Rowdy, his best friend, has lost all of his hopes, "we're all defeated" (p. 42). Mr. P then narrates how Mary used to be some time ago, "she was the smartest kid I ever had" (p. 36). Mr. P tells that she too was a lass with aims and vision once but "she always thought people would make fun of her" for what she wanted (p. 37). She wanted to write books; she was not only shy about her thought to be an author but kind of books she wanted to write. She was afraid that what people will think if they heard of an Indian girl who writes romantic novels. Mr. P continues, telling Junior that he too deserves better than this reservation school. Junior is not certain about what Mr. P is talking, Junior is thinking "I wanted to have it better, but I didn't deserve better" (p. 40-41), unless his teacher shows him the way leading toward hope, leaving all chaos behind "you have to leave the reservation" (p. 42). For Mr. P, the struggle is not over yet; Junior has to fight. Later Junior tells his parents that he wants to change his school, not any school in the reservation but in Reardan, a rich and white farm town, twenty-two miles away from the reservation. His mother is anxious "you want to go to hunters" (p. 46). After that they ask Junior that when does he want to shift because in Junior's opinion "they've always known that I'm weird and ambitious" (p. 46) however his mother warns him that the people of their Indian community around here are going to be uncomfortable as well as annoyed with his choice.

Mr. P →	Hope to be something →	Junior
Junior's Parents →	Junior ↑	Rowdy ←

Mr. P takes a shift of axis from Axis of Power to Axis of Knowledge; previously an Opponent now becomes a Sender. He knows how to convince Junior and his little intellect, he tells him about those who are dear to Junior but they had given up. Junior's Sister prefers to lock herself up in the underground room as opposed to facing the world because she lacked nerves to take a stand for her

dreams. Mr. P tells Junior "Mary was a bright star... moreover, then she faded year by year until you could see her anymore" (p. 40). But Junior can do it for himself he says, we are all losers because we gave up on our dreams"

"But not you... you can't give up. You won't give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside you refuse to give up" (p. 43).

He shows him the path which he is supposed to travel, "you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope" (p. 43). He tries to make sense of what Mr. P said and in the evening when his parents come back home; he questions them that "who has the most hope" and "white people" is the reply of his parents. After that answer, he is aware that what he is supposed to do now. Junior's parents are expected to be the one negative pole of "axis of power", but they are not, although, with apprehensions in their hearts, they agree. His parents stand on the positive pole of "axis of power," the Helpers; he is ready to depart but then thinks of Rowdy his best friend and helper always. "I'm transferring to Reardan; I want you to come with me" (p. 49), when he says to Rowdy then he asks that when is he leaving for his "imaginary journey"? He cannot even imagine that Junior can take such a big step, but he finds that Junior is "as serious as tumor" (p. 51). Rowdy feels affronted, and opines that he knows that Junior always considers himself "better than me" (p. 52). Rowdy takes a character shift in "axis of power" from Helper to Opponent. He uses his emotional conduct and his belligerence as a tool to stop Junior. Seeing his only friend getting emotional, Junior wants to lend a hand to him by staying there, but he is left with no other choice but to leave, "I have to go. I'm going to die if I don't leave" (p. 52). Rowdy punches him hard on his face and leaves, Junior with blood on his face is standing there realizes that "my best friend had become my worst enemy" (p. 52)

In racist Reardan, another circle of actions continues the story. Before leaving, his mother advises, the thing he needs to bear in mind here that "those white people are not better than you" (p. 55) and here outside the school he finds that "those white people couldn't believe their eyes" and they stared Junior like he is a "bigfoot or UFO" (p. 56). He is the only Indian in that place, he feels like a

bad weather, observed by all but liked by none. His travel to hope is leading to nowhere as he sets out from being a “small target in Wellpinit to being a larger target in Reardan” (p. 63), same is the case here like reservation that he is named like ‘chief’, ‘tonto’ and ‘squaw boy’. One day he sees Roger, the Giant, with his gang coming toward him. Roger, though saying that he is cracking a joke, says to him that “did you know that Indians are living proof that niggers fuck buffalo?” (p. 64) Junior considering it the “most racist thing” he had ever heard in his life punches Roger on his face, to his surprise none of them pushes him or get aggressive over it, Roger “he acted like he was the one who’d been wronged” (p. 65) and they leave.

Mr. P(cont.)	→	Hope(cont.)	→	Junior
Grand Eugene	Mother, →	Junior ↑		White students?

Now, Junior is in another battle to make himself at ease amid those people who, he thinks, hate him. Subject again is Junior, but the object is not abstract this time, he has to march to the fore towards his target facing all people there in Reardan. The way he hits Roger after a disagreement, Roger is supposed to connive against him or at least beat him up being an acteur named Opponent as per the model. Not exactly, even Junior considers them his Opponents, because that is what his people tell him about Whites. Junior is uncomfortable with Roger’s calmness as he believes that it is the “most important day of my life”, he takes a stand for himself, and he wants them to attack back so that he may get an opportunity to show the world that he no longer is the target. While at home, he tells everything to her grandmother, and she tries to comfort him by saying that Roger is the alpha male of the school, since you are a new dog there, so he pushes you around to have an idea that “how tough you are” (p. 68), he respects you in reality. In “axis of power”, she stands on positive pole, she does not know how people there behave in actual, but she says that Junior is geared up to face what the next sun holds in store for him. Next morning when their car is out of gas and Junior is set to leave for school on his feet, surprisingly Eugene, his father’s best friend, happens to be heading to the reservation. A guy with long hair on his cool bike was a good man by nature but “he was drunk all the time” (p. 70). Eugene gets him to school, drops him on school entrance then leaves, and when he enters the gate, Roger asks about the person on a

motorbike. Unconsciously, but Eugene's appearance helps him a lot. Eugene's physique and his bike leave an impression on Roger. After knowing that the person on a bike is Arnold Spirit, he asks about the bike and comments about it "cool," things appear normal between them, and Junior feels like he might have impressed the king. Roger with his entire gang stands somewhere between both poles of "axis of power", at this moment it is not easy to label them.

It is the time in Reardan to decide on the basketball team, Junior is not even considering him for C squad, but his dad changes his mind, using the same method once used by Mr. P while convincing Junior to leave the reservation. His father narrates him the story that how he and Junior's mother met. Junior questions what does this story have to do with basketball? He replies "you have to dream big to get big" (p. 136). His father is not only playing the role of a Helper but Sender as well, telling him not only how to do but what to do. Moreover, after that Junior signs up for basketball. On the first day of practice, he steps onto the court, feeling alien. He is there, along thirty-nine other sturdy and tall guys, standing scrawny, short and skinny. Though those white kids are not creating any problem for him physically but psychologically, killing his spirit to take a step. The struggle continues, in the second round it is Roger, he plays "one on one match" with. He nearly wants to give up, but it is his inner him, not allowing him to quit. After that tough match, which made Roger fatigued and infuriated too, Roger says to him "good job" and "I (Junior) bumped his fist with mine. I was a warrior!" (p. 141). It is his own inner strength or spirit, rousing him through all, and after fighting hard, he makes his position secure in final squad "coach said ... I was going to be his Weapon of Mass Destruction" (p. 142). Object achieved, the father becomes Helper, however previously he was a Sender. Moreover, Junior becomes Receiver, taking a shift from "axis of desire" to "axis of knowledge".

Major conflicting action starts after Junior's selection. Two weeks later, he is all set to play his first game against "Wellpinit High School", feeling "absolutely sick with fear" (p.142). When he enters Wellpinit with his fellows, reservation basketball fans are found saying "Ar-nold sucks! Ar-nold sucks! The model functions here, that Junior's aim, our Object from all preceding actions, is in question that his struggle is something/someone to be known amongst his own people. Moreover, here his people are calling him not by his nick name but Reardan name, Arnold. Arnold makes a shift from Subject to Opponent (of his

own people’s collective ambitions) for a while. However, in parallel argument, his own people prove that they are the barrier on Junior’s road to desire. Watching them so organized while welcoming Reardan’s team makes Junior mad. He feels that they had been this organized at the time when he left for Reardan “maybe I would have had more reasons to stay” (p. 144). He noticed Rowdy even, as Wellpinit’s team member and “he wanted to play ... he wanted to kill me, face to face” (p. 144). At this point two viewpoints of the same story clash. From people on reservation’s point of view action at that moment is:

Wellpinit School	High →	Good will of Rez. →	Reservation
Crowd, Rowdy →	Wellpinit’s team ↑	↑	Arnold spirit ←

Junior keeps laughing as he walks into the ground, but once inside the locker room, he starts crying, and is ashamed of his tears at the same time. Coach comes and motivates him, making his aim at moment clear to him, “use your tears. Use your pain. Use your fear, get mad, Arnold, get mad” (p. 144). Here coach can be located in “axis of knowledge” telling the Subject what to do, what role he is expected to play for his team. As Junior (the Subject) steps into the ground, after the first quarter, to play, someone from crowd throws a quarter, hitting him right “in the fricking forehead” (p. 145). Eugene helps him and stitches his forehead after he insists, and he joins his team for second half’s game as their team is already down by five points. After few moments, he joins the court again, he jumps with the ball in his hand, hearing “curses of two hundred Spokanes” (p. 146), and Rowdy intentionally hits his forehead with his elbow, and Junior faints. Eugene helps him to deal with the damage caused by first Opponent, the person from the crowd. However, thesecondOpponent left no chance for any Helper to rescue and makes it impossible for Subject to own Object; results are not in Reardan’s favor.

Time passes, Junior possess now what he initially aimed to achieve, his hope to be something is fulfilled somewhat. Junior’s teammates expect him to be good so he becomes good. He became a freshman starter, all his teammates were physically strong and fast, “but none of them could shoot like me (Junior)” (p. 179). So the earliest Sender Mr. P shifts the axis and becomes Helper as well. He just hopes that maybe after twenty years “they’d (Whites) be comparing some

kid to me” (p. 182). After twelve wins and one loss (from Wellpinit) they had their rematch with the team. This time Junior is more complete and more aware of his position “I felt like one of those Indians scouts who led the U.S. Cavalry against other Indians” (p. 182). He loves his people, but this time he wants a victory for Reardan, he is not “playing for white people” but “to beat Rowdy” (p. 183). The object now is not in competition with Whites or a desire to be known, but to beat his old friend. It is when before the match a local news crew comes out to interview him and questions that how does he feel to play against his former teammates. He tries to avoid the question but when he comes to know that they are interested in his story because “white people were really interested in seeing some Indians battle each other” it makes him “feel so exposed and primitive” (p.184). Later Reardan, or maybe it is Junior who won the match, they successfully “had humiliated them (redskins)” (p. 194). However, soon Junior realizes that everything goes wrong, for Reardan it is just a game with redskins, and for Junior, it is his anger, rage, and pain of the previous match but for Wellpinit it is a matter of survival. Junior is “crying tears of shame” (p. 196); Wellpinit did not recover the loss, winning a couple more games in a whole season. Apparently, actions can be divided as Junior is Subject; aiming revenge from Wellpinit with the help of his team, but a more close analysis proves that the assumption is wrong. This time it is like:

Reardan	→	Victory against Wellpinit	→	Reardan
Junior	→	Reardan team	↑	Wellpinit team ←

It is Reardan who, with the help of Junior, wants a victory against Wellpinit. After what news crew said that Whites love watching redskins fighting against each other, it is like watching “dogfight” (p. 184). The model identifies that the apparent Subject is a Helper, with much less desire to access Object (victory). Reardan is Sender as well as Receiver in this case because Reardan is the one who instructs and the one who is facilitated after successful completion of the actions.

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