

Cultural Reintegration and Identity in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn: A Journey Back to Roots*

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ABSTRACT: Navarre Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* written in 1968 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, is widely regarded as a decisive work in the development of Native American literature. This paper aims to bring forth the elegance of Native American customs and their relevance to the posterity as depicted in the *House Made of Dawn*. The said work is greatly influenced by Momaday's real experience of Pueblo life on a reservation. Momaday blends his creative abilities and lived feelings in the novel. Real-world settings, the reference to true Native American practices, and plausible circumstances indeed influence the novel's details. This is but nonetheless another evocative, realistic portrayal of a Native experience in America. It figures Abel who comes to New Mexico to tend to his ill and frail grandfather. In addition to reiterating the importance of maintaining his people's traditions, his grandfather recounts his yarns from youth.

KEYWORDS: N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, Cultural reintegration, Identity restoration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Widely recognized as a leading figure in the field of Native American literature, N. Scott Momaday has contributed greatly to this important area of scholarship. The year 1968 saw the release of his novel *House Made of Dawn*. This novel was a watershed moment in American literature, serving both as a landmark for Native American authors and an exploration of indigenous cultures in American literature. Set in the American Southwest, *House Made of Dawn* tells the story of a character, Abel, living in the difficult space of both traditional Native American and contemporary American identities. Abel is a character who struggles—likely representing struggles of many real-life individuals—through the challenges of an extremely bifurcated existence. He also, as the title suggests, challenges himself to find an identity and that old "home" within a traditional context that induces a more peaceful state of living.

N. Scott Momaday, a member of the Kiowa tribe, was born to an Oklahoma Native American family in 1934. Raised on several reservations, including Kiowa and Navajo, he absorbed the oral traditions, stories, and values of both his family and the larger Native American community. Not only did the storytelling that suffused his infancy keep his family identity intact, but it also permeated his being and influenced him beyond measure. Following an epic journey to a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Stanford University, N. Scott Momaday became one of the most eloquent teachers and a powerful advocate for the cause of Native American literature.

Momaday's extensive encounter with various dimensions of Native American culture and his quite evident literary talent have a considerable impact on both his selection of subject matter and the overall thematic concerns of his works. In fact, these attributes allow him to accomplish what some critics see as both the articulation of a novel plotline and the anchoring of a reading experience in themes that revolve around the said elements of a plotline. In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday wove oral tradition-myth, prayer, song, story- together with novelistic forms in a way no other American Indian writer quite had before (Weaver 81). Momaday's accomplishments can be stated thus:

Momaday and Silko offer the sacred stories of the Kiowa and the Laguna to the non-Native audience (even despite some of their fellow Kiowa or Laguna's anger at revealing these to non-members). Writers like Momaday and Silko possess the literary finesse and fluidity that enable them to layer Tayo's and Abel's narratives in ways that succeed in reaching all audiences: both Native and non-Native. (Croft 32)

Overview of House Made of Dawn: The novel *House Made of Dawn* chronicles the life of Abel, a young Kiowa man who comes home to New Mexico after fighting in World War II. It consists of four parts, which represent different times in Abel's life and in the lives of those around him. "The Longhair," the first part of the story, introduces us to Abel as he is coming back for good to the way of life that once defined him. Though he is home, he is not at peace, and the wise words of his grandfather, Francisco, who is "a man of the old ways and of the world that is past," do little to guide or assure him. Modernity and the disintegration of "the old ways" are forces that Abel battles both within himself and in the world around him. Azalyn Croft mentions:

Momaday's portrayal of Abel describes the difficult experience of many young Native Americans during the twentieth century: Indian relocation efforts, the struggle to enter the work force, the isolation of reservations, and the harmful effects of alcoholism. In the last half of the 20th century, the Urban Relocation Program created the largest movement of Native people from reservations to urban American cities in American history. Stripped of power and place, many of these individuals turned to suicide and alcohol to forget the world that has brought them so little.(3)

Abel's journey probes deep issues of identity, alienation, and the search for belonging. He tries to reconcile his experience in the mainstream culture with his life as a Native American. He stands as a symbol for many Natives caught in the dilemma of trying to meet the conflicting cultural expectations of two worlds. The novel deals with Abel's character and vividly portrays the practices of Native American culture, especially through the ceremonies that mark the different stages of a community's life.

Themes of Cultural Identity and Alienation :The colonization impact and the consequent identity crisis of Native Americans are central to the theme of *House Made of Dawn*. Abel embodies the kind of cultural dislocation that a number of indigenous people suffer in contemporary America. On returning to his reservation, he finds that he is estranged from the community and its indigenous ways. Although he re-enters the space of the reservation, psychologically and emotionally he is still tied to the city, the war, and a number of non-traditional experiences.

Momaday highlights Abel's alienation in family and community interactions. During the Chicken Pull, a traditional gathering—itsself a peculiar intersection of the familiar and the absurd—Abel becomes the ridiculous centerpiece, symbolizing his estrangement from the customs and rhythms of reservation life. He stands out as an object of pity (not a rare role for many Native American characters in fiction) and also of ridicule. Abel's inability to reestablish ties with his culture dramatizes the larger issues of many Native Americans caught between the push for cultural survival and the pull of a society that often seeks to assimilate them into a devalued and deracinated existence.

Additionally, the novel shows how this alienation is kept alive by unjust systems. Abel and his peers endure violence, poverty, and addiction—just as many Native Americans do in real life. These traumatic occurrences rip apart the core of their familial and community ties, fanning the flames of separate but unequal. Critics have said that Momaday's depiction is not so much idealization as it is an understanding of the depth of Abel's plight. Abel is our modern-day Everyman, just trying to keep his identity in a world that seems all too willing to subsume it in a mélange of Native American stereotypes.

II. IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Cultural practices are central to *House Made of Dawn*. They serve as a canvas and as a crucial part of the connective tissue that binds together the narrative and the characters' individual and collective paths toward each other and their stated goals. The author, N. Scott Momaday, weaves the stories and sacred practices of the Kiowa nation throughout the novel, not just to impart what might be seen as quaint or simply the familiar ways of a presumed "noble savage," but to make the essential point that those practices are indispensable to an identity that is worth having and that is under threat in a modern world. Alan R Velie rightly points out:

The interest in ethnic roots is common to many other sorts of Americans, but seems to be particularly strong among Indians, whose numbers have increased dramatically over the past decade because more mixed-bloods choose to identify themselves as Indian. Religion lies at the heart of most cultures, and as Indians seek to establish their ethnicity, they revive tribal rituals and beliefs. Scott Momaday's fiction chronicles the trend.(144)

Abel's grandfather, Francisco, serves as an important bridge to the past and as the family's storykeeper. Abel's memories are discontinuous, flashlike, and sometimes disorienting. Francisco's recollections of their family history help make sense of the jumbled memories. He also tells the old stories, the ones that make them all a part of something bigger. Feeling and moments shared by the old and the young that form a tapestry of life are moments that are to be remembered, that must be remembered. Francisco imparts the old wisdom of the stories to the listening young, each memorizing and thus preserving what can never and shall never be lost.

Yet another crucial element of cultural heritage portrayed in the novel is the Pueblo agricultural calendar. The ceremonies that compose the calendar unify the different Pueblo nations by structuring their communities around an intermittent temporal rhythm, one that is directly tied to the life cycles of the plants and animals with whom they share their world. And so, at this moment of "plucking the fruit in all the different worlds," Abel's participation in the agrarian trance—Pueblo style—reminds us of our interconnectedness, community, and identity.

At last, in the novel, the "race of the dead" becomes a potent symbol of Abel's coming to terms with his culture. In this ceremony, Abel honors not only his grandfather's death but also the death of the old ways of living in their culture. In reclaiming this ritual, which his people once practiced long ago, Abel enacts a resurrection of sorts. By giving his grandfather the honor of this unique final ceremony, he restores his own identity as a member of the Native American culture. Hafen summarizes:

While Abel's idea of beauty, harmony (*hozho*), and healing may be influenced by Ben's Night Chant, he can finally only be healed by going home to his Walatowa traditions and bloodlines through his grandfather, Francisco.(14)

The Role of Memory and Connection to the Land : In *House Made of Dawn*, memory emerges as a vital motif, especially as it pertains to cultural identity and the restoration of that identity when it has been forgotten. Momaday offers a creative vision of memory that intertwines past and present, imagining memory as the very landscape one traverses to rediscover forgotten roots and the connections that enable one to heal. For Abel, memory is a curative force.

From Abel's understanding and exchanges with his grandfather, one gleans the vibrant cultural memory that is the space and time of Abel's identity. Francisco serves as an important link between Abel's contemporary experience and the Kiowa cultural memory that is somehow always present in the events of the narrative. This construction of memory makes for an important narrative as Francisco's remembrances of the Kiowa way of life serve to link two very different generations together in some kind of a meaningful way. Abel's connection to the land is also about something larger: the reintegration of culture. When he comes home to the reservation, it is not just about family but something deeper, a reconnection to the land that has historic significance for his people. Momaday sees the natural landscape as having sacred qualities that emphasize the role of their culture. He sees it as something dynamic, not static. In terms of Abel, his running at dawn on the reservation is like the first light of day, a moment of birth and renewal. He sees the series of events that place, memory, and his personal identity in the landscape as something that is transformative.

III. THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF TIME AND CULTURE

Abel's bond to the land serves a greater purpose: the restoration of culture. When he returns to the reservation, it is more about the profound historic value of the land to his people than just familial ties. The writer N. Scott Momaday perceives the natural world as possessing a dynamic power that plays a huge part in their culture. For Momaday, like Abel, the sun rising over the landscape is emblematic. The latter's predawn run at the reservation is another kind of ascent—an act of defiance, a reclamation, a powerful placing of memory, machete-like, that clears an identity path through a landscape rendered transformative. The novel's ending, which mirrors its beginning, imbues the story with a sense of continuity and completeness. Abel changes in ways that the reader can interpret as either tragic or redemptive. He does not embrace the way of life that his father and grandfather lived; in fact, he explicitly rejects it. Nevertheless, he is not the same person we first met in the novel. Like Abel, the reader undergoes a change. Like the Pueblo sunrise, the novel promises a new day and a renewal of the way of life that is lived in the Pueblo Indian culture. As many oral narratives, the novel is shaped around a movement from discord to harmony and is structurally and thematically cyclic (Evers 301).

The permeating idea of dawn is rich with meaning. For Momaday, it symbolizes more than just a new day; it signals the event of a new beginning, of a new burst of life and vigor being bestowed upon what had seemingly grown stagnant or lifeless. Abel, as a "dawn runner," carries within him the transition from the day before to the new day. His journey from the modern world back to the ancient one can sometimes be read as a retreat into an idealized past; more profoundly, it can be seen as a statement on the necessity of the revitalization of cultures that have suffered erosion and loss, the appearance of dawn signaling the parting of the fog that has shrouded those cultures.

IV. CONCLUSION

The novel *House Made of Dawn*, by N. Scott Momaday, looks at something that profoundly affects the lives of many Native Americans—the struggle of cultural reintegration. It is a matter of survival to one, like Abel, the protagonist, who is caught in the time and space of two very different cultures, oscillating from one to the next. Momaday, with his master's touch, weaves memory, detail, and vision into the story of Abel's life, portraying with great effect the necessity of reclaiming the lost practices of a culture that makes one whole.

Readers are drawn into the essence of indigenous experiences through the complex simplicities of Momaday's prose. *House Made of Dawn* offers insight into the presence of colonialism in our past and its enduring legacy, eschewing the simplistic path of grievance that so many post-colonial thinkers tread. Instead, Momaday walks on the path of triumph. He constructs a narrative of resilient Native American culture that not only survives but also empowers individuals and communities to heal and remake themselves in the aftermath of the long, dark night of dispossession, the boarding schools, and almost a century of failed federal Indian policy. The interconnectedness of individual and group identities is a key aspect of the novel's themes. It explores how memory, trauma, and spirituality shape identity on both a personal and a communal level. In doing so, *House Made of Dawn* carries a powerful message that goes far beyond the surface of the story. It is not simply a tale of one man's struggles with memory, and thereby a struggle for identity, in a modern society that has left him feeling displaced and adrift. Indeed, the message is much more encompassing.

In addition, the work of Momaday prompts discussions to take place about the historical injustices suffered by Native Americans and the continued impact of those injustices. He encourages us to recognize their considerable and beautiful narratives as well as the perspectives they have. He asks us to take seriously the way they live—even as he illustrates, through his species of storytelling, the juggling act that many Native Americans must perform in order to exist in a manner both meaningful and manageable. At its core, *House Made of Dawn* tells the story of one man's journey. But it is more than just that. It reflects in a powerful way the vital role that cultural heritage plays in shaping identity, healing the wounds of the past, and fortifying resilience in overcoming the adversities of life. Momaday impels us to honor and celebrate the many different narratives that together define the human experience, and he gives a special place of prominence to the stories of indigenous peoples.

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