
Vision and Form in N Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*

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ABSTRACT:

Native American Indians are usually only given a voice in intellectual dialogues when they are needed to validate non-Indian representations of Indians or when their own works reflect or enhance popular concepts of native people. Popular Native American writers and artists have brought some valid issues to light, but remain largely superficial and self-centred in their approach. Writings about the Native American experience should reflect the roots of Native American history, culture and society and both past and present struggles with white America. The role of Indians, themselves, in the storytelling of Indian America is as much a matter of "jurisdiction" as is anything else in Indian Country: economics, the law, control of resources, property rights. It goes without saying that it reflects their struggle with the colonial experience of connected histories.

INTRODUCTION

Though initially received with cautious aloofness, N Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* has now come to be regarded as a major statement by a major American Indian writer. Confused by the novel's "rapidly shifting and sometimes ambiguous chronological frame of reference," earlier reviewers and critics found the novel nothing but an "interesting variation of the old alienation theme", "a social statement rather than a artistic achievement", "a memorable failure", "a reflection, not a novel the compressive sense of the world" with "awkward dialogue and affected description", "a batch of dazzling fragments" which made one critic "itch for a blue peril to knock out all the interstitial words that maintain the sophoric flow." They criticised it's for lack of proper narrative continuity, its haziness, its ethereal characters its indistinct plot line and its language on the rather unacceptable ground that "American Indians do not write any novels and poetry as a rule or teach English in top ranking universities either", referring obviously to the author as a Professor of English. Now, there is a greater recognition of Momaday's fictional art and critics have come to recognise its unique achievement as a novel which succeeds in "interpolating and translating" one for another culture. Despite the novel had succeeded in making impacts on even earlier critics though they were not sure of their own responses. They found it "a story of a considerable

power and beauty”, “strong in imaginative imagery”, creating a “world of wonder and exhilarating vastness”. In more criticism there are signs of greater clarity of understanding of Momaday’s achievement. In his comment John Z. Bannet had pointed out how through a remarkable synthesis of a poetic mode and profound emotional and intellectual insight into the Indians per during human status Momaday’s novel becomes at last the very act it is a dramatizing and artistic act, a creation hymn”. In an article Baine Kerr (1978) has elaborated this point to suggest Momaday the modern Anglo novel(s) a “vehicle for a sacred text”, that in it he is attempting to transliterate Indian culture, myth, and sensibility into an alien art form, without loss.”

The novel is an embodiment of the American Indian’s vision and his deepest spiritual yearnings is beyond doubt. How this vision has been translated into a language of fiction remain yet to be examined. In this paper, how Momaday translates the Indians “eye and action” view of the world in fictional terms. A proper understanding of Momaday’s vision of the American Indian is, therefore, an essential prerequisite for a grasp of novel’s complexity.

The novel, a blend of many techniques and achieves its synthesis through the “eye” which is peculiar to the Indian. In an essay called “A Vision beyond Time and Space” Momaday provides many insights into the Indians vision of life. Wonder, according to him, is the principal part of Indian’s vision. His active life is nothing but “an affirmation of the wonder and regard, a testament to the realization of a quest for a vision.” “The native vision, the gifts of seeing truly with wonders and delight into the natural world” according to him “is by informed certain attitude of a reverence and self respect. It is a matter of extra sensory as well as sensory perception. In addition to the eye, it involves the intelligence, the instinct and the imagination. It is the perception not only of objects and forms, but also essences and ideals. To quote him, “Most Indian people are able to see in these terms”. This vision is peculiarly native and distinct, and it determines who and what they are to a great extent”. It is indeed the basis upon which they identify themselves as individuals and a race”. It is “very nucleus” of their self residing in their blood. Thus, in Momaday’s world view the Indians is identified in his ability to see differently commenting on the “cultural nearsightedness” of the contemporary Americans he says “our eyes, it may be, have been trained too long upon the superficial, and the artificial, aspects of our environment... and consequently we fail to see into the nature of our own humanity.” He emphasizes the need “to enter upon a vision quest

of our, that is, a quest after vision itself” and feels that the American Indian “perhaps the most culturally secure of all Americans “because he was gifted with a vision.” In the integrity of his wholly in his possession of himself and of the world around him; he is quintessentially alive.

DISCUSSION

The “equations” that constitute this vision are “a sense of heritage, of a vital community in terms of origin and destiny, a profound investment of mind and spirit in the oral traditions of literature, philosophy and religion”. *House Made of Dawn* is essentially a realisation of these equations. It is about vision, about perception, articulation, repossession and re-enactment of this vision. It is Genesis and Apocalypse at the same time. The fusion of vision and form in this novel which is subtly brought out as a piece of Navajo silverware” is a unique achievement in contemporary fiction, it has “mythified Indian consciousness into a modern novel”. The novel demands of the reader an intuitive grasp of the Indian vision Momaday himself defines this vision in terms of a song

You see, I am alive,
You see, I stand in good relation to the earth,
You see, I stand in good relation to the Gods,
You see, I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful,
You see, I stand in good relation to you,
You see, I am alive, I am alive.

Thus, “a sense of place, of a sacred, of a beautiful, humanity” is essential components of the Indian vision which is at once spiritual, moral and aesthetic. It is woven in the very fabric of Indian life. For the Indian, every creative act is a “blood recollection..... a whole and in evocable act of imagination. It is a synthesis,” not a general experience and in this “there is an aura of tribal intelligence, an exposition of racial memory. Indian art, according to Momaday “is the essence of abstraction and abstraction of essence” and this understanding “of order, and spatial relationships, proportion and design’, is most fully realized in language in oral tradition. “The oral tradition of Indian”, says Momaday “even more than his plastic arts, is vast and various”. In its stories and songs, its legends and love and prayers, it is not only exceptionally rich and imaginative”, it also reflects on understanding of and belief in the power and beauty of language” that is lost on those “who have , by and large, have only the experience of written tradition”. This vision of one great moment and beauty” but it “has

certainly to be believed in order to be seen”. We can see *House Made of Dawn* only if we believe in this vision. The key to vision apparently lies in and the understanding of oral tradition of Momaday seeks to translate in terms of fiction.

The novel begins and ends with the fragments of traditional song as Abel the protagonist and symbolic carrier of this tradition, joins the dawn runners in ritual enactment of a primitive ceremony after the death of his grandfather Fransico. Thus, Abel and Fransico are two major characters of this novel linking the past, present and future. In their polar lives the two recent the quintessential life of an Indian.

The novel begins as the Abel comes home after completion of his experience in the war in a “truck”. While Fransico is going to receive him in his “Wagon”. It ends while Fransico is going to joins the spirits of dead and Abel goes with the dawn runners in a quest of vision of the race. It begins where it ends, producing the notion of circularity that is interminable. These are points in it which give us impression of terminality but there is no termination each ending is a new kind of beginning. The novel is about a series of beginning and a series of ending which keep turning on each other therefore it does not offer us a plot but only fragments of a vision, the totality of which we can arrive only if we read it creatively recreating the entire experience as it is enacted in racial memory. That way alone can we see its unity and its meaning for there is a unity between the four sections “The Long Hair” “The Priest of the Sun,” “The Night Chanter,” “The Dawn Runner ” which are the aspects of same reality the same experience and the same tradition. Though primarily concerned with Abel’s quest for identity the novel is about Francisco who as Baine Kerr points out “works as a structuring principle” in the novel and “act as the lodestone to the novel’s conflicting energies”, Abel’s tragedy lies in the fact that he doesn’t have a vision which will enable him to see his own destiny. More specifically it lies in his failure to connect with the vision of his race available in the oral tradition he must recover the vision before he can recover himself. The seemingly confusing and hazy narrative suggests Abel’s incapacity to see properly his own place in universe.

The novel begins during the “relocation” years the most inglorious period in the history of American Indian but the choice of period seems to be suggesting of the fact before people “relocate” him, Abel and his people must relocate themselves, must find their proper place and destiny. Abel returns from the war totally disoriented, a long hair and progression towards the novel “*House Made of Dawn* .” He must recover the vision which he has lost

and which alone will help to become a dawn runner. He must ‘relocate’ himself by reposing what he has lost, his vision, and his sense of place. Abel initially appears as one who has lost his sense of land. He cannot relate himself to any place. He is out of place everywhere. We cannot appreciate his predicament without taking into account the fact that away from the land he is like fish out of water, suggested the beginning of the section, “The priest of the Sun”. Cut off from their land, the Indians are like fish out of water that (1974) “Writhe in the light of the moon, the moon, the moon, the most helpless creatures on the face of the earth” (p 89). This land-and-man equation is crucial to the understanding of the novel. To quote Momaday,

the Indian conceives of himself in terms of land. His imagination of himself is also and at once an imagination of the physical world from which he proceeds and to which he returns in the journey of his life. The landscape is his natural element; it is the only dimension in which his life is possible. The notion that he is independent of the earth, that he can be severed from it and remain whole, does not occur to him.....

In his view the earth is sacred.....

It is a living entity, in which living entities have origin and destiny. The Indian does not lose sight of it, even; he is bound to the earth forever in his spirit.

Abel’s tragedy is that he is alienated from the land and in the process alienated from his true self. This connection between man and land is suggested repeatedly in the novel by reference to land and landscapes *The House Made of Dawn* is rooted in a land “still and strong “beautiful and around”(p1). This philosophy of landscape is most explicit wherever there are references to the sacred complex of the Indian society. Participating in the ceremony of eagle watching, Abel gets a sense of the “spatial majesty of the sky” and discovers a strange and brilliant light” that lies upon the world, in which “all the objects in the landscape” are “washed clean and set away in the distance”(P 17). In the landscape he also discovers a divinity, for

Such vastness makes for illusion, a kind of illusion that comprehends reality, and where it exists there is always wonder and exhilaration (P13).

When Abel returns he discovers his loveliness, as if he were already miles and months away “from everything he knew and had always known”(p23). The land life equation is more explicit in the section “July28”. Here life in form and motion seems to be emerging from the land itself. Each form of life has only a “tenure in land”. Abel discovers his lost connection only when he is able to relate himself to the land sacred to his forefathers. The violence that man has done to nature is revealed in “an old copper mine” that is “a ghost” (p.59), with its “black face” and its “gray wooden frame” (p.60).

The way alienation from land cripples Abel’s faculties is revealed in his incapacity to see and articulate. Abel discovers his lost sacralise and his place by participating in the rituals and ceremonies of the tribe that lead him to a greater and greater clarity of vision. He discovers his sense of place by perceiving “the culturally imposed symbolic order” inherited from his grandfather. In the beginning he is insecure, and inarticulate. He is cut off from his roots and consequently he has lost his voice. “one of the most tragic things about Abel,” Momaday says at one place, “is his inability to express himself. He is in some ways a man without voice. So I think of him as having been removed from oral tradition”. In the novel itself, Momaday refers to Abel’s initial inability to speak. After his return from the town, he had tried “to speak to his grandfather,” but “he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythms of the tongue, but he was no longer attended to it”(P58). The words are there “like memory, in the reach of hearing,” words that could take hold “of the moment and make it eternal”(p.58). He could get back his wholeness. “Had he been able to say... anything of his language which had no being beyond sound, no visible substance”(p.58). He is dumb, not just silent but “inarticulate”. He needs words and language to discover him. When he is in the valley where “nothing lay between the object and the eye,”(p.59), he wants to make a song “out of the coloured canyon,” but “he had not the right words together”(p.59). He wants to write a creation song “of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of dawn from the hills”(p.59). He is able to sing that song only when he becomes the dawn runner, when he is able “to see at last without having to think” (p.212). As he discovers his vision, he runs and begins to sing, “There was no sound, and he had no voice, he had only the

words of a song” (p.212). He at last discovers the words that he needs to be a dawn runner but that comes only after he cuts his way through the Babel that surrounds him.

This philosophy of the soundless word is beautiful adumbrated in the sermons of Tosamah, the priest of the sun. In his sermons reinterpreting the Biblical “principio verbum, Tosamah offers a severe indictment of a dominantly verbal culture. Abel’s final song is thematically linked with Tosamah’s Genesis story.

It was almost nothing in itself, the smallest seed of sound-but it took hold of the stillness and there was motion forever: it took hold of the silence and there was sound and everything began(p.91).

The indictment of a purely verbal culture comes sharply in Tosamah’s indictment of the Anglo love for words:

Now, brothers and sisters, old John was a white man and the white man has his ways. Oh gracious me, he has his ways. He talks about the word. He talks through it and around it. He builds upon it with syllables, with prefixes, and suffixes and hyphens and accents. He adds and devides and multiplies the word. And in all this he subtracts the truth (p 93-94).

This indictment is followed by criticism of a culture based on manipulation of mere words:

The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions... He has diluted and multiplied the word, and words have begun to close in upon him.... It may be that he will perish by the word (p.95).

Abel’s final triumph comes, therefore, not in a verbal triumph, but in a formal movement, a ritual that relates him at once to his forefathers and a spirituality of motion and movement. The race is a manifestation of a newly earned knowledge that is power. Momaday comments on the significance of the race:

It is a long race, and it is neither won nor lost. It is an expression of the soul in the ancient terms of sheer physical exertion. To which the runner is to know that they draw with every step some elementary power which resides at the core of the earth and which, for all over

civilized ways, is lost upon us who have lost the art of going in the flow of things. In the tempo of that race there is time to ponder morality and demoralization, hungry wolves and falling stars.

His novel is not only about the recovery of this vision but it is also about the way it is recovered. It is not only about seeing, it is also about doing. The illusion of mist and haziness that Momaday creates initially is related to Abel's incapacity to see. He recovers his vision and with that his other faculties only gradually by participating in the collective heritage, which is mystic and historical at the same time. It comes to have through the discovery of the sacrality of life, another major equation of the Indian vision. Abel repossesses his sense of the sacred by participating in the ceremonies and rituals of the race. In them he is "restored as a man and as a race". Through his narrative Momaday wants his readers also to participate in this sacred ritual of recovery. The novel, therefore, assumes the nature of sacred text in which the ethos and mythos of the Indian are embodied in a manner that is peculiar to the Indian mind.

Momaday, therefore, narrates the story not in the conventional manner but rather in the Indian manner, the manner of the oral tradition. It is a fictional transfer of a memory "that persists in the blood and there only," a memory that remains "beyond evolutionary distances". It is a blood recollection," "an intricate image" indeed, composed of innumerable details "vivid and immediate". That the novel seeks to recapture the rhythms of the oral narrative is suggested not only in the story of Abel but also in those Tosamah. The Priest of the Sun and Francisco, The night Chanter. The narrative validates the oral tradition which helps Abel recover his identity finally, and operates through a series of powerful images which leave an overwhelming impact on our consciousness. Those images are seen through the consciousness of Abel and that is why they come in fragments, but through them and with Abel we see the "sense of beauty of proportion and design" that is essential qualification of the dawn runner". The section 'The Long Hair' is a series of such "intricate images" which leave us disturbed, looking for order, for patience, for connection, imposing upon us the need for a vision, a vision where all things are related simply by having existence in the perfect vision of a bird"(p.57).

The visual impact of the Indian eye can be felt in the narrative skills of Momaday. It is most powerfully felt in the scene depicting the flight of the golden eagles in the air, in the narration of the feast of Santiago, and in the bear hunt. They give us a vision which is peculiarly Indian, revealing his sense of form and beauty. For in all their inchoateness they have a unity that

transcends all. The insects, birds and animals that populate the novel are part of the Indian's Consciousness: he sees himself and the divine and the sacred through them. Francisco, who is snaring the sacred in the bird initially, (p.6), discovers it finally in the bear (p.198-204). This sense of the sacred, which is peculiar to the Indian, can be seen in all that Francisco does. In and through him Abel relates himself to his heritage. In the section "The Long Hair", Abel returns to his grandfather physically: his final return to him is rituo-symbolic.

Abel has a mixed heritage, a heritage in which the racial line between the Red and the White is totally blurred- the Indian is distinguished not by his colour but by his vision. His genealogy is confused, "He did not know who is father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a sin or an Isleta, an outsider anyway" (p.11), which makes him an archetypal Indian, representing all Indians. On the other hand, through his grandfather he inherits an ancestry which links him with the while Christian race. Through Francisco he is at once connected with Father Fray Nicholas and Porcingula Pecos. The historic identity of Fray Nicholas is established through the concrete device of Diary and Letters, but porcingula remains enigmatic, the archetypal mother in her various aspects. She is, as Kerr puts it "many things: the totem of Bahk-Yush: a Christian saint (Maria de los Angeles): a whore: Francisco's lover: and in remote yet richly possible connections Pony, Angela and most importantly Taime, Mamoday's heartfelt creation deity". Through her, Abel participates in the diaspora of Bahkyush, the feast of Santiago, the holy rites and rituals of regeneration and reawakening. From Fray Nicholas he inherits a legacy of sin and guilt, which he keeps confronting again and again. It relates him not only to the eagle hunters but also to the "marauding bands of buffalo hunters and thieves" (p.15). It reminds him of a long lost war, which impinges on him consciousness again in the image of the tank and disorients him for the time-being.

The novel is about his reorientation, the most crucial aspect of which is his understanding of evil. Momaday's treatment of love is suitable, complex and profound; for him evil is what the Indian is not. In his treatment of evil Momaday again shows the humanity of the Indian's perception, "a moral regard for the beings, animate and inanimate, among which man must live his life". Consequently, the novel is free from the kind of racial violence that characterizes the fiction of some of the black writers. Evil does not have a specific identity in the novel though Velie has pointed out that by making Abel an Indian, Momaday has indirectly led many re-examine the identity of Cain. It is definitely associated with whiteness, but by making it a

matter of chance in the case of the Albino, Momaday seems to imply that pigmentation is only accidental: “Whiteness has an ambiguity that is creative in the Albino- the white man the Albino, that equation whatever it is. It is “in the Melvillian Sense”, as Velie puts it “the intensifying agent in things most appalling to mankind”. What the novel succeeds in communicating is the fact that despite repeated betrayal the Indian continues to be the carrier of the speed of life, a source of renewal and regeneration. The other characters of evil in the novel are similarly vague and shadowy, almost spectral. They are evil presences like the Albino, who follows the movements of Francisco(P-67) and whom we vaguely identify through the “coloured glass”(P-67).The evil figures appear as those who seek to deprive Abel of his sacred heritage of his mobility, most characteristically expressed in his manual movements. It is significant that Martinez , the Culebra, seeks to destroy Abel by destroying his hands(P-174-75). “And his hands were broken, they were broken all over” (P-184-85). The characters of evil disappear as soon as they appear, never to be heard of again. By universalizing evil and by reducing whiteness to a metaphysical and ambiguous dimension, Momaday strikes a positive note in Red-White relationship.

This brings is to the consideration of the most controversial incident in the novel, the murder of Albino. There is no “explicit explanation of motives” and the reader is left wondering about the exact nature of the entire episode. There is a strong element in the novel to suggest that Abel does not think of the Albino as a human presence. The narrative suggests to him to be a kind of “presence” for when Abel and the Albino speak each other, they say something so low “as if the meaning of what they said was strange and infallible (P-80). The Albino is constantly described as a “white man” whose laughter ends “in a strange, inhuman cry” and it “issued only from the tongue and teeth of the great evil mouth, and it fell away from the blue lips and there was nothing left of it” (P-81).The language from the blue lips and there was nothing left of it”(P-81). The language clearly suggests the image of a snake here and it is obvious that Abel sees the Albino as a snake. The narration of the murder also indicates that Albino tries to kill Abel in a mortal coil, a fatal embrace, which has homosexual overtones. That Abel sees the Albino as a snake is again emphasized when he tells in the court, ”Well , your honours, it was this way, see? I cut up a little snake meat out there in the sound “(P.149).Father Olguin suggests it to be “An evil spirit”, attributing it to a “Psychology about which we know very little”(P-101). For him it was “an act of imagination so compelling as to be inconceivable to us

(P-102). Even otherwise it is indicated that Abel sees the Albino as a witch or sawah, for Abel's inexplicable behaviour in the war is also suggestive of his capacity to visualize evil in terms of his own psyche. It is obvious from the narrative that he responds to the tank not as a machine but as an evil presence (P 24-25), which so disorients him that he temporarily loses his sense of identity and his connection with land," He reached for something, but he had no notion of what it was, his hand closed upon earth and the cold, wet leaves"(P-24). Later in his delirium, he challenges it in the instinctive manner with a war dance, "And there he was, hopping around with his finger up in the air and giving it to that tank in Sioux or Algonquin or something"(P-117). These incidents clearly refer to the instinctive self of Abel which is liberated from the white presence.

The snake-albino-Whiteman-evil connection is too complicated to lead to any clear explanation, but it is apparent that Abel is striving to get rid of something not natural to his self. Earlier, he kills the young eagle to liberate it of its anguish, symbolically liberating himself from the hood that deprives him of his vision (P-22). It is quite possible that Abel kills Albino, "as a frustrated response to the Whiteman and Christianity", or in him he kills "the Whiteman in the Indian" or an "a part of himself and his culture which he can no longer recognize and control". Abel's responses after the incident are like that of a person bitten by snake and tosamah describes his case as that of "Snakebite" (P-149).

Abel's re-emergence is like a therapeutic process, a kind of exorcism, a process of healing in which the ritual of the sexual act has a tremendous significance. In the Indian world-view the act of sexual union is a sacred act in which all secret, even those of sorcery and evil, are revealed to the participants. This is suggested by Momaday's detailed narration of the sexual act and its impact on the participants, whose natures are altered by the experience. Sex in the novel is a fertility rite which leads to healing and restoration of self. It is almost a rite of initiation through which the sacred enters into the human like the bear that Angela St. John thinks to have conceived. These episodes are thematically connected with the quest of the life-seed that Abel is looking for. The two most crucial of these rites are the ones between Angela is looking for. The two most crucial of these rites are the one between Angela and Abel and Porcingula and Francisco which initiate them into their heroic quests. The two episodes have a symbolic function , for, the union of Francisco and Porcingula is re-enacted in the union of

Abel and Angela St-John, who, identifying Abel with the hear, connects him the sees and medicine man of his people. In the two, myth and history become social reality. It is obvious that throughout the novel, Momaday's stress is not on race but on a vision and a participation mystique peculiar to a race. Abel overcomes all on slaughter on his self by discovering this vision which enables him to participate in a tradition that goes back to a mythic past. Momaday's art lies in his ability to give us glimpses of this lost world in a world now full of hatred, violence and bloodshed. In him vision and form become one and the same.

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