
N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn as Socio-Cultural Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT:

The Native American is someone who thinks of himself, imagines himself in a particular way. By virtue of his experience, his idea of himself comprehends his relationship to the land. These awesomely beautiful images express the confluence of Momaday's historical, cultural, social, literary, and artistic interests. The corpus of Momaday's work is significant because he insists on showing the life-giving qualities of the arts and the interrelationships of the arts to other components of tribal culture. Through his autobiography, fiction, poetry, painting, and drawing, Momaday reveals the essential wholeness and unity of experience that Indian communities recognize as a fundamental dimension of the order of the universe.

INTRODUCTION:

On a literary level, N.Scott Momaday's works reflect a sociological development, which seems to indicate a reversal of roles: today it is the Indian way of life, which is praised as an example to be followed by the white man. Momaday's first novel *House Made of Dawn* depicts the painful search for identity; *The Way to Rainy Mountain* expands the ideal and emphasizes the importance of Indian identity. Momaday's writings illustrate historical circumstances particularly well the opposing views representative of white society's attitudes to contemporary American Indian problems. While the interweaving of elements from Indian and non-Indian cultures are characteristic for *House Made of Dawn* and represent the basics for its structure and themes, it is the strong emphasis on Indian qualities which determines this novel.

A perfect fusion of fiction and history by Momaday, himself a Kiowa Indian, combines and Juxtaposes Christian and Indian motifs and images, and thereby attempts to give his novel a larger, more universal framework. Modern man's plight, his disturbed relationship to nature,

is illustrated by an Indian with the biblical name “Abel” who wanders between the white man’s world, represented by a hostile urban environment, and the Indian world of his forefathers which is closely linked to nature. The novel depicts different aspects of the concept of alienation, like the feeling of powerlessness, the sense of meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self-alienation. The protagonists who live in a white urban environment suffer from the impression that external agents control their destinies. As they are removed from the established values of their native communities, they feel culturally estranged and socially isolated. These sentiments and a vague notion of meaninglessness lead to self-extrangement, yet finally motivate the main protagonist, Abel, to search for means of identification, which he ultimately finds in his Indian background. The narrative technique supports the basic themes of alienation and search for identity which are varied and played upon in the manner of a musical composition.

Abel, the protagonist of the novel, experiences the grave difficulty of remaking his social life in an image of holiness after he has been shattered by combat overseas during World War II and by confrontation with an evil, Albino witch snake figure upon returning home to Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico. Abel's life parallels the Navajo hero's journey into dangerous mythic space, and it is not until he has extensive contact with the transformative powers of Bear that he is capable of surviving with dignity. He remembers the whine of the tank on the battlefield as reminiscent of the moaning wind that he had heard as a child and that he will hear again when he kills the albino during a rainstorm. The narrator comments:

He had always been afraid. Forever at the margin of his mind there was something to be afraid of, something to fear. He did not know what it was, but it was always there, real, imminent, unimaginable. (P : 107).

Momaday’s first novel *House Made of Dawn* reveals Native American history, literature, and society in the novel, Abel murders an Albino Jemez who has humiliated him at a traditional ceremony. Momaday uses the term *white man* to describe the Albino, and the murder is rendered in sexual terms – a sort of macabre double entendre – which make it appear that, if one Indian is literally murdering another, the white man is symbolically raping the Indian :

Abel waited. The white man raised his arms, as if to embrace him.... Then he closed his hands upon Abel and drew him close. Abel heard the strange excitement of white man's breath, and the quick, uneven blowing at his ear, and felt the blue shivering lips upon him, felt even the scales of the lips and the hot slippery point of the tongue... He withdrew the knife and trust again lower, deep into the groin. (P : 82)

The novel tells the story of a young Jemez Pueblo man, Abel, the protagonist, who leaves home to fight in World War II. When he returns to the Pueblo in the mid- 1940s, he is profoundly estranged from his culture, and is provoked into killing an Albino, who appears to Abel as a witch snake rather than as a human being. After an affair with a white visitor to Jemez, Angela St. John, Abel is relocated to a Los Angeles prison where he spends some lost years. Upon Abel's leaving prison, his new friends Milly and Ben Benally, a Navajo, attempt to help him pull his life together. But Abel is harassed by the slick Kiowa preacher-peyote road man Tosamah, and is drawn into a fight with the wicked cop Martinez, who brutally beats him almost to death. Ben and Angela appear in a Los Angeles hospital room to sing and encourage Abel back from the edge of death. As Abel slowly mends, Ben sees him off on the Santa Fe train eastbound for Arizona and New Mexico. At the end of the novel, Abel returns home just in time to care for his dying Grandfather Francisco. As Francisco's spirit begins traveling to the other world, Abel runs on the snowy wagon road at dawn to reaffirm his ties with the land.

At Abel's trial, Father Olguin explains to the Jury that Abel regarded the Albino as "an evil spirit", an argument that is consistent with a passage from Abel's consciousness:

He had killed the white man. It was not a complicated thing, after all; it was very simple. It was the most natural thing in the world. Surely they could see that, these men who meant to dispose of him in words. They must know that he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance, that there could be no hesitation whatsoever. For he would know what the white man was, and he would kill him if he could. A man kills such an enemy if he can. (P:102).

Tosamah explains the murder, mockingly, by saying that Abel considered Albino a snake – an evil spirit. What leads to further confusion is an incident that takes place between the time of chicken pull and Abel's murder of the man. While he is working in the cornfields,

Francisco hears mysterious whispers. The scene concludes with the figure in the corn fields watching Abel's grandfather leave the fields: "Above the open mouth, the nearly sightless eyes followed the old man out of the corn field, and the barren lids fluttered helplessly behind the colored glass".

From social-interaction perspective the scene during which Abel kills Albino provides the most striking instance of Momaday's refusal to give an explicit explanation of motives. This "mysteriousness", in fact permeates much of *House Made of Dawn*, though it is most visibly apparent in the conclusion to the novel – after Abel has returned home from Los Angeles. By creating a circular, nonlinear narrative, replete with disjuncture and multiple storytelling voices, Momaday is trying to tell a complicated story-from several points of view and several tribal perspectives-in a way that is consistent with his understanding of the structures of oral tradition and the cyclic nature of time. Momaday was the first Indian writer to end his novel as it began-with the image of a man running at dawn. Abel's singing of the "*House Made of Dawn*" prayer as he runs, acts to restore wholeness and inner harmony. The circularity of this affirmative scene, which expresses the potentiality of life at its fullest, is complemented by the novel's four-part structure, which also conveys a sense of wholeness.

House Made of Dawn presents a purification ritual that Abel undergoes. Traditional rituals take place under the direction of knowledgeable practitioners, who know which forms are correct for a given individual. However, Abel has returned from a new kind of war fought on unknown and alien territory; it seems to him that must be a new ritual, worked out in the terms of his own experience. It also appears that unlike traditional ceremonies, social values, methods and superiority as Abel's healing process is not a gift for the community but a purely personal transformation.

In Momaday's, *House Made of Dawn*, Abel represents a great many people of his generation, the Indian who returns from the war, the Second World War. He is an important figure in the whole history of the American experience in this country. It represents such a dislocation of the psyche in our time. Almost no Indian generation or Abel's generation escaped that dislocation, that sense of having to deal immediately with, not only with the traditional world, but with the other world which was placed over the traditional world so abruptly and with great violence. Abel's generation is a good one to write about, simply because it's a tragic

generation. It is not the same; the generation after Abel did not have the same experience, or the one before. So it is, in some sense, the logical one to deal with in literature.

Abel returns home and appreciates the importance of the community and of contributing to its overall prosperity. He is physically home, but it is hard to define culture that he is still a long way from becoming part of the community and regaining a personal sense of himself. In effect he must come to understand, to internalize the rich fabric of the society, and he must begin to make his interpretations within the framework of the society's beliefs.

In fact, form and content of this novel is built upon mythological, historical, socio-cultural themes. The image of bear, for example, recurs in different contexts and Indian legends. Angela, the white woman to whom Abel makes love, compares him to a strong youthful bear, and later on tells her son a story of a boy born of a bear and a maiden; the story resembles a Navajo legend that Ben remembers. In one of his sermons, Tosamah, the self-appointed urban priest of the Sun, tells a Kiowa legend about seven sisters and their brother who turn into a bear and the seven stars of the Big Dipper; and finally, the young man Francisco measures his strength against that of a bear in a traditional Indian hunting expedition. Thus the cultural and social image of bear connects legendary Indian fiction with Momaday's modern fiction, and at the same time, fictional past and present within the novel. The title of this novel is from a prayer song *The House Made of Dawn*, apparently symbolizing an Indian identity completely in harmony with the universe and the "organic calendar", as Francisco calls it. Ironically, and probably representative of the situation of the contemporary Indian, it is Ben, the Night Chanter, and Indian who seems at least superficially to have adjusted as a consolation to the completely alienated Abel. Ben, however, only remembers the traditional words and legends after he gets drunk. Abel, who was unable to express himself in the white man's world and who could not pray when he first returned to his native society, silently sings the ritual song when he finally finds the right pace as a "dawn runner".

The account is of course an all-important legacy for Abel, because he has been struggling for years to overcome personal torments both physical and mental in a modern world that will not allow him to be himself. When Francisco dies, Abel at last knows what he must do, and after he prepares his grandfather for burial and notifies the priest, he goes out in the dawn to run the ceremonial race. He goes, like his grandfather before him, to run the race which Momaday has called

an expression of the soul in the ancient terms of sheer physical exertio." he finally overcame the physical torment of overexertion and "ran beyond his pain. (P: 188)

The importance of being in harmony with the motions of the universe is one of the author's main themes. Thus nature does not merely provide the scenery but influences or even determines the course of events. Although the landscape is far from idyllic, the description of its beauty and majesty is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. To achieve and keep this harmony man has to perform certain ceremonies and rites which are inexplicable and without power in the white man's world. The communication gap between the two worlds is thematically represented by Abel's trial and by his desperate attempt to fight in the traditional Indian way against a modern tank. As Abel is inarticulate, these incidents are commented upon by other figures. Their interpretations vary according to their distance from the Indian culture- from complete misunderstanding in the report of the white soldier, over rationalistic, half-truthful explanations by the Catholic priest and Tosamah, to Ben's instinctive, sensitive grasping of Abel's motivation. The gap between the rural Indian environment and the urban white environment is illustrated by the inversion of Indian values in the white man's world and vice versa.

The novel presents decay of Indian society and culture in the society is symbolized by violence to Abel's face and hands and the resulting loss of vision. It is also illustrated by the ambiguity of the urban Sun priest's attitude, by the shabbiness of the circumstances under which the city Indians live and by their excessive drinking in order to be happy, as Ben sings it.

Tse'gihi'

House made of dawn,

House made of evening light,

House made of dark cloud,

House made of male rain,

House made of dark mist,

House made of female rain,
House made of pollen,
House made of grasshoppers,
Dark cloud is at the door. (P :146).

The search for identity and the emphasis on the supportive quality of Indian tradition are not only thematically expressed but also implied by the narrative technique. The first and final chapter, located in the Indian country, are clearly structured and told in a consistent narrative manner. Despite variations of the point of view and frequent shifts between fictional past and present, there is a clear cut distinction between the different time levels as well as between the narrative voice and the protagonists' states of consciousness, although they are all grammatically expressed in the third person. Also different typefaces are used to indicate legends, letters and sections from a diary which are inserted. Apparently Momaday tries to support even in the narrative technique the hypothesis that the magnificent landscape brings the imagination to life but that "there is no confusion of objects in the eye but one hill or one tree or one man". This clear vision is obstructed and finally lost in the city, a development that is again reflected in the structure of the narration.

In the novel, Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, truth is considered a classic because it is a work that explores traditional values, revealing truth and falsity about those values from a framework of tribal realism. It is diametrically opposed to fantasy, which often suppresses moral issues. Momaday's work allows profound ideas to be conceptualized, allow its Indian readers to work through those ideas and move on to affirm their lives as Indian people. Momaday's vision is enormous. He wants to create centres with performance facilities, ceremonial grounds, campgrounds, archival facilities and research centres. Momaday sees these centers as places where young people can interact with elders and medicine people to become grounded in their cultures, scholars can interact with each other, and Native and non-Native people can experience reverence for sacred space.

The culture of an individual is definitely dependent on the culture of a group or class, which in turn is dependent on the whole society to which that group or class belongs. Momaday

vary the traditional literary image of the fatherless hero who sets out on a quest for identity in a way that is representative of the contemporary Indian situation. Being without roots, Abel, Ben and Tosamah, who stand for today's Indian generation, can neither find a new father in the modern world nor rely on any fathers in a destroyed old world; they have to return to their grandfathers. It is Indian culture of their forefathers which offers them support, protection and the possibility of regaining a lost identity. Abel, who has lost his innocence by first leaving the Garden of Eden and by then being driven out of it for having killed the "White man", attempts to regain it when he returns to the land of his forefathers and identifies with their culture. Admittedly, another solution is implied in the Angela plot. Contrary to Abel, Ben and Tosamah, who are unable to procreate and produce an heir, and to Milly whose daughter dies, Angela gives birth to a son named Peter. She conceives him by her white husband first, but does not accept him, then "re-conceives" him by the Indian Abel. The possibility that both cultures should be assimilated in order to survive, which is also hinted at in the Santiago legend, is however, not fully developed. The final goal is apparently clear vision without rationalizing: "... Abel could see at last without having to think". Momaday once explicitly stated that:

The Indian is a man from whom great deal can be learned, for the Indian has always known who and what he is; (and that) he has a great capacity for wonder, delight, belief and for communion with the natural world contradictory to the destruction rampant in "civilization"(1978:112)

When Abel prepares to run with the other men at dawn, as the novel circles back to its beginning, he rubs his upper body with ashes. This ritual action is connected to bear healing ritual, for ashes purify and ward off witches whether they are sprinkled from a bear paw or dusted on to a person's flesh.

His body was numb and ached with cold, and he knelt at mouth of the oven. He reached inside and placed his hands in the frozen crust and rubbed his arms and chest with ashes. And he got up and went on hurriedly to the road and south on the wagon road in the darkness (P.190).

In light of history and social relations the novel concerns survival, not salvation, enduring rather than sense of prevailing. The dawn runners physically manifest Indian strength – they abide, and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long out waiting. And Momaday is proposing not only a qualified hope for cultural continuity, but a holy endurance. The running is a sacred rite and an act of courage, thus a warding off of fear and evil, the specters that chew at Indian probity throughout the text. The race at dawn is additionally a sacrament of creation. As such it outlines the novel’s purpose and achievement. Momaday is a preserver of holiness in *House Made of Dawn*. He has transported his heritage across the border; in a narrative and style true to their own laws, he has mythified Indian consciousness into a modern novel. As Abel runs, he becomes repossessed by the land:

..... he could see at last without having to think. He could see the carry on and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn. (P:191).

A sacred vision emerges in the novel when Abel discovers himself and when... he returns home through his grandfather and his racial memory. His quest takes him through the typical mono-mythic pattern of descent and death, through “loneliness and fear”, until he is able to return to the reservation and join the ancient religious ritual, the run against evil and death..... He will be able to accept his place in the universe and defeat the fear that has dominated his life.

Abel’s fear arises from unconscious recognition of individual, racial, tribal and religious extinction. He cannot see the continuity, the oneness of life, because of his fragmented existence... Like the Bahkyush tribe, which was almost destroyed by plague, Abel makes a “Journey along the edge of oblivion”,..... a journey which takes him through the white man’s war, a series of brief sexual encounters, prison, and finally near – death from a brutal beating by a Los Angeles policeman. Out of their suffering, the Bahkyush acquired a tragic sense, a “dignity and bearing”, which made them holy, “medicine men..... rain makers and eagle hunters”. During the depth of his despair, close to extinction, Abel likewise discovers some religious truths and acquires a holy vision that returns him to himself and his tribal past.

One of the major themes of *House Made of Dawn* is that the people will return in a new dawn to this ancient way, throwing off the invasion and conquests of the white people and their

religious vision. The narrator speaks in the novel of a prehistoric civilization and social progress that “had gone out among the hills for a little while and would return; and then everything would be restored to an old age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn..... In part, this explains the significance of the chant *House Made of Dawn*..... it is a prayer for a return, a rebirth of the old way.

CONCLUSION:

Momaday has created a new romanticism, with an admiration for the land, a transcendent optimism, and a sense of mythic wholeness. His worship for the land can be compared to the pastoral vision found in most mainstream American literature, but the two visions contain essential differences. Many white heroes fail or are unconvincing because their relationship to the land has been more fantasy than history and because they are conquerors and violators. Their vision must then remain either an anomaly or tragic. This is even more true of modern Americans, whose experience as a nation, as Momaday has said, is a repudiation of the pastoral ideal, an uprooting of man from the land, and a consequent “psychic dislocation... in time and space”. In contrast, Abel... can return and rediscover, because he has a land vision that preceded the white conquerors. Abel’s grandfather, a farmer and holy man who lives by the organic calendar is able to sustain the shock of civilization and technology and preserve and transmit the land vision that he has never violated as an individual or as a people. “He reaches through to past – present – future reality by a process of symbolic interpretation of the evidence.”

END NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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