

N. SCOTT MOMADAY'S HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: PERSONAL VS COMMUNAL

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Native Americans also referred to as American Indians or simply Indians, are the indigenous, pre-Columbian inhabitants of North and South America and their descendents. They comprise of numerous distinct Native American Tribes and ethnic groups like Navajo, Cherokee, Kiowa, Chippewa, Choctaw, Apache, Creek, and Blackfeet and so on. Native Americans with similar characteristics formed a main tribe or nation. Each tribe has its own language, religion and customs and is everything for its residents. Essentially, "Grounded Indian literature is tribal, its fulcrum is a sense of relatedness. To Indians, tribe means family, clan, community, ceremonial exchange with nature, and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful" (Lincoln: 8) For most of the part, the tribes lived peacefully, believing that nature is sacred and was to be shared. The men were hunters, warriors, protectors while women attended children, homes and managed fields. They have a great respect for their land and elders and a sense of belongingness for their society. Tentative contacts between Native Americans and Europeans principally for trade had marked the century preceding the European invasion of America. Initially, the advent of Europeans and the removal of Indians from their land led to the conflict between the tribes and between the Indians and the whites. Indians were forced to reservations, were subjected to repressive bureaucracy, and were unable to practice traditional modes of economic social and religious life. For many Indians, the reservations they had been forced on to were aliens, poor lands where Conversion to Christianity, boarding school experience and the government's outlawing the practice of traditional religious ceremonies added to the woes of the Indians. Native Americans possessed a broad metaphysical understanding, sprung from dreams and visions and articulated in myths and songs, which complemented their scientific and historical knowledge of the lives of animals and of men. Before the Indians mastered the tool of writing, their literature was predominantly oral as the power of language was more significant and their art of story-telling has kept the flame of their tradition for generations. The Native American literature written during 18th and 19th century is considered as a literature of transition between the oral tradition which flourished before Europeans arrived on the continent and the beginning of 1960's when the Native American Renaissance began. The Native American Renaissance is a term coined by the critic Kenneth Lincoln in his 1983

book *Native American Renaissance*. This book names the era in American Indian literature that followed N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn* and Lincoln's designation of this era as a renaissance continues to shape the scholarship in this field. Lincoln points out that in the 1960's and the 1970's, a generation of Native Americans was coming of age who were the first of their respective tribal communities to receive a substantial English-language education, particularly outside of standard Indian Boarding schools, as well as in colleges and universities. Conditions of Native people, while still very harsh during this period, had moved beyond the survival conditions of the early half of the century. *House Made of Dawn* tells the story of a young American Indian Abel, who returns home from a foreign war and caught between two worlds; one his traditional world of reservation and other of Industrial America, goading into a compulsive cycle of dissipation and disgust.

House Made of Dawn opens with a prologue that invokes the title image: "Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting" (Momaday 2010, 3) Abel, the protagonist of the novel is running through the rain at dawn near Walatowa, New Mexico, his body dwarfed by the winter sky and covered by the marks of burnt wood and ashes. Dypaloh is an invocation. It shifts the novel into the oral tradition, which is a particular kind of discourse, one which is 'other' to the non-Indian reader. Dypaloh signals a transformative act. By understanding this one word, reader is able to discover new meaning in the novel, and perceives it apart from the linear method in which we define and understand literature or stories. While *House Made of Dawn* reflects, in many ways, its author's background, it is also a detached portrayal of the tragic consequences when identity cannot be formed and begins to disintegrate as a result of conflicts in the Indian world. Abel epitomizes the Indian identity crisis, a phenomenon particularly prevalent after World War II, when many veterans failed to find a way back into their native communities. Abel's tragedy lies in his inability to determine his place and define himself. His crisis is intensely personal, and yet it represents a latent crisis of American Indian cultures in general. A key message of *House Made of Dawn* is that the survival of American Indians depends on the continual reassessment of their identities. This reassessment must be achieved by each successive generation. It is in this context that one can understand Momaday's central statement on the search of selfhood:

"We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely who and what, and *that*

we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go on unimagined.”(Momaday, (1998, 55)

Abel’s suffering results from a sense of loss which he cannot comprehend. It is his existence between two cultures which threatens to destroy him and redemption comes only when he renews his attachment to his tribal heritage. The resulting crises and sense of loss are, as Momaday put it, is characteristic of “the people of one generation back, particularly who were taken forcefully, as it were, conscripted, and taken from a traditional world that is characterized by harmony and peace and order, and set down in a world that is characterized at that time by chaos, World War II.... And the people to whom it happened were a particularly tragic generation.” (Momaday, 1971) Abel is struggling to find an identity within his own tribe long before he comes into direct contact with the culture of modern America. Abel’s problem grows out of a generation conflict within a tribal community in which the ancient traditions tend to lose their meaning for young Indians in their confrontation with the cultural tradition of modern America. The old generation of traditionalists tends to exert pressure on young tribal members in order to assure the perpetuation of the old ways. This can lead to a conflict between communal obligations and the search for a new Indian identity which must include the benefits of the modern society. Abel cannot simply adopt the traditional customs of his tribe as would have been natural in a community unaffected by the encroachment of an alien culture. He turns his back on the Indian world and enters modern America. Here, under the influence of an unsympathetic environment, Abel’s conflict is aggravated. He shows all the symptoms of identity confusion: estrangement from both the tribal and the Anglo-American cultures, sexual and emotional disturbances in his personal relationships, and an inability to channel his aggression appropriately.

The Indian community in which Abel grows up belongs to the Rio Grande Pueblo villages in New Mexico. As a result of their geographical isolation and their cultural conservatism the Rio Grande Pueblos have succeeded in keeping their languages, religions and traditional customs relatively intact despite the pressure of Anglo-American cultural encroachment. This is how Momaday portrays life in the village:

“The people of the town have little need. They do not hanker after progress and have never changed their essential way of life. Their invaders were a long time in conquering them; and now, after four centuries of Christianity, they still pray in Tanoan to the old deities of the earth and the sky...”(Momaday, 2010, 14)

In *House Made of Dawn*, the old man Francisco functions as the teacher and guardian of the Pueblo way of life. Under his guidance, Abel is raised according to the tribal patterns of the people and acquires a deep feeling for the environment. Despite this seeming harmony with the tribal world, however, Abel somehow remains a stranger within his own community. He was born into his position as an outsider: He did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and brother Vidal somehow foreign and strange.” (Momaday, 2010, 15) Tribal communities are not necessarily homogenous entities as they are often perceived by outsiders; within the tribe subgroups may exist which do not meet the full acceptance of the majority. The early deaths of his mother and brother increase Abel’s isolation. He is left with his grandfather, Francisco, as his only relation. The lack of family ties and the domineering authority of his grandfather prevent Abel’s full integration into the Native community.

A most significant experience during Abel’s adolescence is his vision of an eagle which carries a snake in his talons. Both the eagle and the snake have deeply religious meanings for the Indians, but for Abel the eagle is a symbol of freedom, beauty and life. In another instance when he hunts a female eagle of the couple, instead of feeling victorious about it, in keeping with tribal tradition, Abel is sad and disgusted. He fails to reconcile with his act of depriving it of its freedom for the benefit of the community. He decides to kill the bird rather than allow it to live in captivity in the village. This and other such emotional responses reflect a deep respect for the well being of other life-forms, an attitude common among American Indians. However, Abel fails to see the wider implications of the man-animal relationship in his tribal religion. The hunting and killing of animals does not constitute a breach of the spiritual bond between man and animal if it is performed in the appropriate traditional way. Without the knowledge of these ancient practices Abel reacts emotionally rather than ritualistically. Abel’s decision to leave the tribe is the final rejection of authority and his leaving is a departure in dread, accompanied by fear of an unknown future in an unknown world. Momaday stresses the young Indian’s position between the cultures by means of Abel’s shoes. Whereas some Pueblo communities approve of wearing shoes only when heel is cut off, to avoid injury to the sacred earth on which the community’s existence depends; for Abel, the shoes are simply objects of good craftsmanship and has longed to wear. The shoes symbolically signify the world Abel is about to enter:

“But now and beyond his former frame of reference, the shoes called attention to Abe. They were brown and white; they were conspicuously new and too large; they shone; they

clattered and creaked. And they were nailed to his feet. There were enemies all around, and he knew that he was ridiculous in their eyes.” [Momaday 2010, 98]

After World War II, Abel returns to his grandfather in drunken state that indicates his inability to cope with the horror and turmoil of his recent past. In an attempt to reintegrate him self into the pueblo culture, the recollections become a psychological process of searching for the roots of his confusion. Contrary to his expectation, his experience of modern American life has been one of disintegration, chaos, death and decay. It was an embodiment of destruction and denial of life and was in contrast to the crucial experience in Abel’s youth when the eagles appeared to him as symbol of life and freedom.

Abel’s participation in an ancient ceremonial game of Chicken Pull offers him an opportunity to reconcile with the tribal culture, but frustrated over the loss of game to an opponent who is also an albino, Abel kills him. This act of violence reflects “Abel’s inability to cope with the confusion he is subjected to in his personal and cultural isolation. American cultural has estranged him from his home: his endeavor to enter into the ceremonial life of his tribe has been unsuccessful; his attempt to establish an identity in an intimate relation with a white girl Angela has failed.” (Schubnell, 126) The resulting frustration is the source of the aggression Abel directs against the albino. This killing is a manifestation of rage among Indians because their whole world has been altered by these usurpers. However, Owens believes that a crime has been done, a man has been killed, and “in attempting to destroy evil, Abel has become one with the evil, accepted its seed”. (103) Furthermore, Abel’s failure to re-enter the Indian world of his childhood is his loss of articulation, the power of the world. The world links the Indian to the religious and mythological heritage. If the world is lost, culture and identity are forfeited. The text reads: “He was alone, and he wanted to make a song out of the colored canyon... but he had not got the right words together.”(Momaday 2010,57) As his imaginative recreation of childhood was an attempt to reconcile with the tribal past, his effort to make a song is an endeavor to restore harmony between him and the universe. The figure of Albino is a complex image of Abel’s schizoid state of mind: his outburst of violence is an act of revenge against the “white man’s world” and is, at the same time, the execution of an evil spirit. It is also possible that Abel recognizes himself in the figure of the albino, a mixture of Indian and White. Viewed in this light, Abel’s act of destruction is an attempt to annihilate his confused self. The killing of the albino is a symbolic representation of the cultural conflict which Abel is trying to resolve.

Abel's killing of Albino also suggests that he is involved in the ritualistic killing of an incarnation of evil which is consistent with the laws of his tribal culture. Abel's statements at the trial that the killing was "the most natural thing in the world", and that "a man kills such an animal if he can", gives credence to such a view. The trial scene is of particular significance, for it is here that the issue of cultural relativism is addressed most explicitly. The tragedy is that the Abel's law and the laws of his American judges are incompatible, resting on different cultural assumptions, and that it is in accordance with the judge's law that he is sentenced and sent to prison. After the completion of the sentence, Abel settles down in Los Angeles, but the burden of past proves too heavy and the pressure of life in the city is too great to allow him integration into the new environment. Subsequent events lead to Abel's ritualistic passage back to his tribal culture and identity. In a fit of alcoholic delirium followed by a brutal beating from Martinez, a violent and corrupt police officer, Abel is found lying on the beach outside Los Angeles. This very moment when Abel seems to have exhausted all the possibilities of finding redemption holds the seed to his ultimate recovery. On the symbolic level Abel's isolation is evoked by the image of the fence near the bank: "There was a fence on the bank before him... He raised himself to reach for the fence and the pain struck him again." (Momaday 2010, 92)

Abel's inability to reach, let alone overcome the fence, is symbolic of his failure to break through the barriers between him and the mainstream of society. After realizing the source of his dilemma during his vision of the men running after evil, Abel finds the strength to reach the fence. Thus, the fence symbolism stresses the theme of cultural segregation and at the same time emphasizes Abel's vision as the turning point of the novel. Abel is "lying in a shallow depression in which there are weeds and small white stones and tufts of long grey grass" (Momaday 2010, 92). It is a common feature of initiation ceremonies that the initiate is placed into a shallow grave from which he eventually rises as a new being. On the symbolic level, the beating also represents initiatory mutilations, pointing towards symbolic, death which are frequent features of rites of passage. Water is traditionally a symbol of potential life, of creation and fertility, the element from all cosmic manifestations emerge and to which they return. Abel's proximity to water, i.e., the sea suggests the dissolution of his state of estrangement and the potential for rebirth into his tribal culture. Abel is also affiliated to a fish, a helpless creature removed from the natural element of his native culture. At the same time Abel's recognition of the moon's power to order and control the universe reflects

his growing re-attunement to American-Indian thought as moon is associated with Indian's myth of death and rebirth.

Another major step towards restoration and initiation into his tribal culture is Abel's vision of the runners after evil. Dreams and visions have always been of utmost significance in the lives of American-Indian people. John Skinner, in this context, observes that "Man succeeds first in his dreams... man becomes in dreams and words before he becomes indeed. A man becomes his successful dream, not his successful deed" (95) In his vision he sees that "The runners after evil ran as water run, deep in the channel, in the way of least resistance, no resistance... Evil was abroad in the night; they must venture out to confrontation...." (Momaday 2010, 96) This vision modifies Abel's view of his own actions in the past; he realizes that, although his destruction of the albinos as a source of evil was with tribally sanctioned practices, Pueblo religion offers non violent ways of controlling supernatural powers. A careful diagnosis of Abel's trouble leads him to realize that "He had lost his place. He had been long ago at the center, had known where he was, had lost his way, had wandered to the end of the earth, was even now reeling on the edge of the void" (Momaday 2010, 96)

Abel realizes that the Indian world of boyhood is the only place where he can find a meaningful existence. He attempts and succeeds to establish a formal union with his tribal heritage through the ceremony of the Night Chant, the funeral rite after the death of his grandfather and his participation in the ceremonial race that ends the novel. Paula Allan remarks that through ceremonial practices, "the isolated individualistic personality is shed and the person is restored to conscious harmony with the universe". (118) Thus, *House Made of Dawn* becomes a novel that shows how a traditional Indian community which, threatened in its cultural survival by an encroaching alien world, is struggling to defend itself against the influence. Unlike many characters in American fiction, who are running away from something and have no viable alternative to which they can turn, Abel's running manifests an act of integration, not a symbol of estrangement. He has finally returned to his place in the house made of dawn.

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