



Dialogics of Tradition and Modernity in Native American Voices: Revisiting Abel in N Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*

Dr Rosy Tep

Assistant Professor of English,
Tetso College, Dimapur
Nagaland, India

Abstract:

N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) is a literary work that examines the perplexities of Native American identity and culture. The narrative is introduced of a young Kiowa, Abel, the central character, whose journey serves as a lens through which we can explore the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity within the Native American context. The novel serves as a miniature of the struggle faced by Native Americans in the mid-20th century—a struggle to reconcile their indigenous heritage with the usurping forces of modernity. Tradition emerges as a vital source of identity for Abel. His interactions with the land, his elders, and his ancestral practices provide him with a sense of grounding in a world rapidly changing due to Western influences. Simultaneously, Abel grapples with the pressures of modernity. His experiences in the urban landscape expose him to a world vastly different from the one he left behind. The clash between his traditional beliefs and the fast-paced, consumer-driven society he encounters is a central theme in his journey. This interplay of tradition and modernity serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing dialogue between indigenous heritage and the forces of change in contemporary society.

Keywords: Native American, tradition & modernity, healing, cultural revival

Introduction:

N Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) is enclosed between two *Jemez* formula words, *Dypaloh* and *Qtsedaba* which are traditionally used to open and close Native American stories. *Jemez* is a Native American tribe in the Southwest. The novel explores themes of identity, cultural displacement, and the power of storytelling. Momaday's work, recognized with the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, showcases the arrival of a mature and sophisticated Native American literary artist. This rephrasing highlights the novel's autobiographical elements and the significance of place and landscape in shaping the story. Momaday's novel illustrates the intrinsic connection between storytelling and identity. Inspired by his Kiowa heritage, Momaday uses the dramatic landscapes of his ancestral lands and oral tales to convey profound narratives. His training as a poet and storyteller gives his writing a lyrical quality.

Momaday suggests that his novel has the potential of a tribal myth where the prologue anticipates the closing and thus presents a circular structure. In honor of Native American Heritage Month, Momaday's groundbreaking *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Award in 1969 which also has a double significance as stated by the Pulitzer Fiction Jury in *Wonder and Exhilaration: N. Scott Momaday's 'House Made of Dawn'*, "Our first choice is N. Scott

Momaday's 'House Made of Dawn, because of its (...) eloquence and intensity of feeling, its freshness of vision and subject, its immediacy of theme" and because an award to its author might be considered a recognition of "the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans" (Murphy). There is a perceptible autobiographical element in *House Made of Dawn*. The novelist's search for his roots may be observed in Tosamah's speech which deals with Kiowa history. The description of *Jemez* and *Navajo* cultures are based on the writer's personal experiences. Similarly, the landscape of the southwest and the way of life of the tribal people are important for the novelist. Witchcraft which he observed among *Jemez* people in the novel depicts as a recognition of a fact of life. Momaday says, "It is something which exists, it is part of the world we live in Everybody has a deep conviction that it exists." He had seen "runners after evil" who guard *Jemez* Pueblo against witches. Tosamah in the novel is like Momaday to a certain extent. Both are deeply interested in Kiowa history, language and the oral literature and have a fascination for words.

Momaday has proven with his masterpiece that identity is inextricably linked with storytelling. Indeed, as a Kiowa Native, he draws upon the dramatic wild landscapes of Arizona, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, his origins, places that inspired the oral tales of his ancestors, to eloquently pass on the stories his Kiowa father told him as a child. From an early age, Momaday was thoroughly steeped in the Kiowa culture of his father's family. The lyrical nature of Momaday's writing owes much to his training as a poet and storyteller. The novel begins with the *Jemez* storytelling tradition of *Dypaloh* and ends in the same place, emphasizing the circular structure and the importance of roots and heritage in shaping one's identity.

Momaday's novel begins with the prologue,

Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting. There were many colors on the hills, and the plain was bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses grazed the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around. Abel was running. He was alone and running, hard at first, heavily, but then easily and well. The road curved out in front of him and rose away in the distance. . . (Momaday 1)

It is from the storytelling tradition of the *Jemez*. *Dypaloh* is how storytellers begin their stories, much like how storytellers of a different tradition might say "Once upon a time." The prologue opens with a scene-painting passage which describes the vision of a man named Abel, running in a vast landscape emphasizing the timeless beauty of the land and the ageless customs of the people who have lived on it for centuries. One fascinating fact about the novel is, the novel begins and ends in the same place. Momaday writes candidly in the novel, "I am Indian and I believe I'm fortunate to have the heritage I have I grew up in two worlds and straddle both those worlds even now. It has made for confusion and a richness in my life. I've been able to deal with it reasonably well, I think and I value it" (193).

Momaday says, "It is something which exists, it is part of the world we live in Everybody has a deep conviction that it exists." When he re-establishes his relationship with his tribal culture, he is saved. In the novelist's own words, Abel "tries desperately to live in the present; yet he is lessly determined by the past." The novel is a strong plea for a search for identity and a realistic description of the forces which impede such a search. However, this birth of natural communities were "never written down" (86) and, hence, compartmentalization and redistribution of geographical locations with the advent of colonial modernity and its aftermath of nation-state formation completely posited aboriginal spatial-cultural history as negations to justify the newly invented memory of a place.

Displaced Native American Voices

House Made of Dawn explores the displacement experienced by Native American veterans returning from World War II. It portrays the struggle faced by Native Americans as they tried to reconcile their traditional beliefs with the encroaching forces of modernity. The novel sheds light on the rich tapestry of Native American culture, emphasizing the importance of traditions, rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling in preserving and grounding indigenous communities. Native American populations became more connected with the mainstream culture as a result of World War II. Prejudice and discriminatory policies did not disappear overnight, but the fact that people

from ethnic subcultures were thrown together in barracks in the war led to some social boundaries. Many whites met real Indians for the first time, and many Indians met their first whites. Like Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, many Native Americans came back to the reservations they had lived on with conflicted views, having been forced to align their own beliefs with American culture. Unfortunately, what little progress was made in human understanding was very quickly overruled by developers, who soon tried to exploit reservation land for their own profit. The novel sheds light to a complex and multifaceted view of Native American traditions. It showcases the importance of these traditions as a source of identity, community, and spiritual grounding. Through rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling, Momaday paints a vivid picture of the rich tapestry of Native American culture.

The setting of *House Made of Dawn* is integral to its purpose, as it highlights the clash between the Native American world and the white world. The reservation and Los Angeles are depicted differently, showcasing the contrasting mindsets and ways of thinking between the two settings. The novel delves into the complexity of Native American folklore and the challenges of interpreting it for outsiders. It also addresses the history of forced migrations and relocations faced by Native tribes, leading to a sense of displacement and alienation. One reason that *House Made of Dawn* made such a powerful impact when it was published was for its treatment of Native American folklore and the values these tales passed on to subsequent generations. In Western culture, readers look for the "moral" of a story, especially one that is told in the context of a religious lesson. In the case of the folklore, interpretation for an audience of outsiders is almost impossible, so it is hard to explain the culture that values them. On the contrary, the fact that Western myths can be made so accessible is one of the factors that has helped Western culture dominate the globe during the age of colonization. The Kiowa and the Laguna Pueblo Indians have a history of forced migrations and repeated relocations, as is the unfortunate history of nearly all Native tribes in the United States. Furthermore, with the Indian Relocation Act, Abel left his home and become lost in the contemporary haze of mainland American cities, unable to assimilate.

Momaday presents storytelling as a vital tool for preserving aboriginal history. The novel traces the origin of the Kiowa people, emphasizing their deep connection to the natural landscape. The Kiowa's relationship with their land is depicted as a reciprocal bond, essential for their spiritual harmony. Abel, the novel's protagonist, struggles with his cultural dislocation and loss of language, reflecting the challenges faced by many Native Americans in navigating their identity in a changing world. Through Abel's journey, *House Made of Dawn* explores the power of cultural memory and oral stories in remapping the place of the Kiowas. This rootedness in the natural landscape of a place should be the base for mapping the place and locating the identity of the aboriginals,

Do you see? There, far off in the darkness something happened. Do you see? Far, far away in the nothingness something happened. There was a voice, a sound, a word — and everything began. (85)

Momaday captures the Kiowa community's inseparable relationship with Walatowa landscape. For the Kiowas, their place is not merely a geographical territory; rather it is a spiritual domain of consciousness where components of the natural world create a life-place of animistic faith. A separation from this place of faith leads to spiritual sickness, uncertainty and alienation. In the novel Abel, the protagonist, oscillates between the rootedness of his aboriginal heritage on the one hand and the call of the white modern American society. His divided loyalty leads to a state of homelessness. Momaday through the predicament of Abel brings to the fore that Native American aboriginal way of life is essentially rooted to its place. It is a reciprocal relationship between the land and its people. The Kiowas trace their origin as a sun-dance culture and "they do not hanker after progress and have never changed their essential way of life" (52). It is through Abel's struggle to come to terms his identity that *House Made of Dawn* remaps the place of Kiowas by means of a journey through cultural memory manifested in numerous oral stories.

Abel's Cultural Dislocation

Abel suffers from the fragmentation of identity and alienation by leaving the home community. Momaday depict Abel's unhoming through rejection of identity, through lack of language and access to tribal stories and through lack of physical presence. Homi Bhabha has written extensively on the concept of the 'unhome' in *The World and the Home* (1992) and offers this description,

The 'unhomely' captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place. To be 'unhomed' is not to be homeless The unhomely moment

creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer 'taking the measure of your dwelling' in a state of 'incredulous terror' In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other. (141)

Bhabha describes a nuanced antithesis to be home, a feeling of estrangement and dislocation. The home may even still be present, but the outsider feeling persists. In addition, Abel's return to Walatowa in 'The Longhair' section of the novel fails because "he had tried in the days that followed 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 rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it" (53). The repetition of the failure of language appears because Abel's inability to speak is connected to the loss of the old tongue, which conflates with his dissociation with the past oral traditions and stories as well. It also connotes the loss of a deeper and more spiritual harmony with language. Abel realizes his lack of power and what agency he might have had with the language if he had known how to re-possess it. "And yet it was there still, like memory, in the reach of his hearing... Had he been able to say it, anything of his own language—even the commonplace formula of greeting "Where are you going" — would once again have shown him whole to himself; but he was dumb. Not dumb—silence was the older and better part of custom still—but inarticulate. (53)

Abel's story begins with his return from World War II, highlighting the cultural displacement experienced by many Native American veterans during this era. His return to the reservation is marked by a profound sense of disconnection, a feeling shared by countless indigenous individuals who found themselves torn between their ancestral traditions and the encroaching forces of modernity. The novel serves as a literary work that intricately weaves the voices and experiences of Native Americans, with the character of Abel at its center. Through Abel's journey, readers are invited to explore the delicate interplay between tradition and modernity within the Native American context. Abel must come to terms with the changing world and his own past in order to overcome his pain and disconnect, Ben Benally reminds him, "You know, you have to change. That's the only way you can live in a place like this. You have to forget about the way it was, how you grew up and all. Sometimes it's hard, but you have to do it" (131). Abel's problem of identity is compounded by his handicap of loss of articulation. His return to his homeland and to his culture is impeded by his inability to speak, "Not dumb ---- silence was the older and better part of custom still ---- but inarticulate" (53). The power of the word which is so vital and so sacred to the tribal cultures fails Abel fails at a crucial time. When the word is lost, culture and identity are lost. One's integrity can be established only by the word. He regains his voice only at the end of the novel.

Abel's predicament testifies to the intervention of the outer forces into the life-place of the Kiowas, i.e., the advent of the white colonizers and the intrusion of colonial modernity attribute Kiowa oral culture with sinister associations to be negated as if the sense of a place begins only with the arrival of the whites. Abel's grandmother tells him how their aboriginal community considers their language to have a spiritual attachment to its place. Cultural reality and beliefs exist orally in a language which evolves from the bioregional attachment of the people to its place. Therefore, Abel's grandmother believes,

The word did not come into being, but it *was*. It did not break upon the silence, but *it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it*. (86)

For Abel's grandmother "words were medicine; they were magic and invisible" (85). However, the white man's use of the language has completely stripped off the spiritual essence of the Kiowa way of communication. Abel makes sense of his grandmother's story on 'word' as he notices how colonial modernity exploited language as a tool of constructing realities to eradicate the oral past and dispossess the Kiowas from their life-place,

In the white man's world, language, — and the way in which the white man thinks of it — has undergone a process of change... He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language—for the Word itself— as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. (85)

By the novel's end, Abel is still unable to communicate traditionally, even upon Francisco's deathbed, "He wanted earlier, in the dawn, to speak to his grandfather, but he could think of nothing to say. He listened to the

feeble voice that rose out of the darkness, and he waited helplessly” (171). Yet, with Ben Benally’s Nightsong, Abel regains a voice, one that is strong enough to help him express himself, “There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song” (185). Ben’s prayer and healing words have affected Abel, as earlier Ben is confident that Abel would benefit from the Nightsong; “We were going to sing about the way it always was. And it was going to be right and beautiful. It was going to be the last time. And he was going home” (166). Ben is the unusual director of Abel’s ceremony, in this way. Ben, as Abel’s friend, understands the forces that have unhomed him. The stanzas of the Nightsong are exactly what Abel needs, a “home” in the earth, in the dawn and in the sacred stories.

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.

 Restore my feet for me,
 Restore my legs for me,
 Restore my body for me,

 Restore my mind for me.
 Being as it used to be long ago, may I walk.
 May it be beautiful before me.
 May it be beautiful behind me.
 May it be beautiful below me.
 May it be beautiful above me.
 May it be beautiful all around me. (129-130)

The ultimate desire for recovery and the ability to walk again is conveyed through the song of the novel. The concept of Dawn symbolizes a fresh start in both the novel’s transitional setting and Abel’s own life. Rather than leading Abel to his downfall, Dawn instead represents a newfound optimism for a better future. Abel seeks to establish his own identity within his tribal community before fully embracing the modern American culture that he encounters. However, there is a struggle between the older generation, resistant to change, and the younger generation, eager to adapt. This creates a cultural crisis, as Abel finds it challenging to fully accept or adopt the customs of his own culture. Consequently, he attempts to distance himself from his tribal roots and immerse himself in modern American culture, resulting in a clash of identities. Ultimately, Abel returns to his tribe with the hope that they will accept new values while preserving their traditional ones. It is not just Abel who is searching for identity, but also his tribe as they navigate the impact of white man’s culture. The people of Walatowa, including Abel, are isolated within the canyon, allowing them to maintain their language, religion, and customs. Francisco, Abel’s grandfather, acts as a guardian of Pueblo culture, passing on traditional wisdom to the next generation. Through teaching Abel and his brother Vidal to observe the sun, Francisco highlights the importance of nature in shaping tribal life. Abel engages in activities such as sheep herding, deer hunting, and participating in ceremonies, further emphasizing the connection between the sun, the land, and tribal rhythms. Despite this, Abel still feels like an outsider within his community and grapples with the unknown identity of his father. After the death of his mother and brother, he experiences a sense of loneliness. Francisco holds a dominant role in Abel’s life, controlling his education and social interactions. This underscores the conflict between an individual’s growth and the unchanging customs of the Pueblo culture, which finds itself at a crossroads.

Conclusion

House Made of Dawn is a powerful exploration of Native American identity and culture. Through the story of its protagonist, Abel, the novel delves into the challenges faced by Native Americans as they grapple with cultural displacement and strive for cultural revival amidst a changing world. Abel's journey also represents a new era of Pueblo culture, symbolized by his performance of his grandfather's funeral rites and his participation in a ceremonial race that signifies his reconciliation with his native culture and universe. The cyclical structure of the novel reflects the cyclical concept of time embedded in Native American myths, and the novel ends where it begins, emphasizing the importance of roots and heritage. Momaday's work highlights the healing power of Native American traditions and the communal aspect of cultural revival, emphasizing the resilience of Native American communities and their ability to draw strength from their traditions. Through Abel's narrative, readers gain insight into the enduring significance of Native American voices in literature and the profound contributions of indigenous cultures to our shared human experience.

Momaday crafts a poignant narrative that not only portrays the complexities of Native American identity but also serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring spirit of indigenous cultures. Through Abel's journey, readers are invited to explore the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity and to appreciate the profound significance of cultural preservation and revival. This novel stands as a testament to the enduring importance of Native American voices in literature, shedding light on the rich heritage and ongoing struggles of indigenous communities in the United States. Amidst the turmoil, the novel also offers a message of hope. Through Abel's interactions with wise tribal elders and his involvement in traditional ceremonies like the Sun Dance, we witness the potential for healing and cultural revival. Momaday underscores the resilience of Native American communities and their ability to draw strength from their traditions. Abel's journey embodies the struggles, resilience, and enduring cultural heritage of Native American communities as they navigate the complex interplay of tradition and modernity. The novel underscores the importance of preserving and reviving indigenous traditions as a means of healing and reconnection. Readers were able to gain insight into the enduring significance of Native American voices in literature and their ongoing dialogue with the forces of change in contemporary society. As we delve into the novel, we are reminded that the echoes of Native American voices continue to resonate, inviting us to listen, learn, and appreciate the profound contributions of indigenous cultures to our shared human experience.

Momaday explains how he sees the novel as a circle and ends where it begins. He informed with a kind of thread that runs through it and holds everything together.

He was running and a cold sweat broke out upon him and his breath heaved with the pain of running. His legs buckled and he fell in the snow. The rain fell around him in the snow and he saw his broken hands, how the rain made streaks upon them and dripped soot upon the snow. And he got up and ran on. He was alone and running on. All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain. Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at least without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the field beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn. He was running, and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. House made of pollen, house made of dawn. *Qtsedaba*. (212)

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