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IMAGES OF SELF AND THE OTHER: EXPLORING IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN SCOTT MOMADAY'S *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

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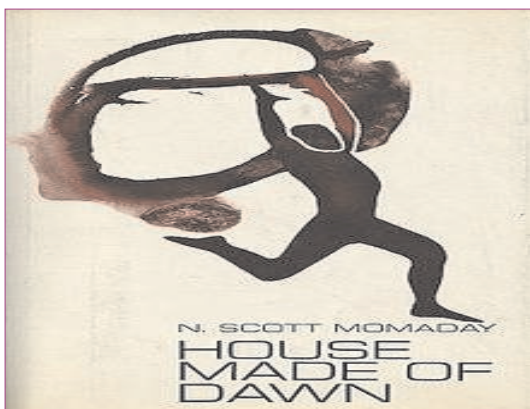
ABSTRACT:

Identity plays a crucial role in an individual's life. It is his/her identity which helps him/her exist in the society. Identity can be defined as a set of personal and behavioural characteristics that define an individual as a member of a particular group. People distinguish themselves from other groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture and thereby develop a sense of who they are. Due to an individual's affinity towards his/her particular group or community, he/she may develop a tendency to consider another individual not belonging to his/her community as the other. The 'other'ing exists in almost all spheres of life and may even take a huge grandeur when considering issues of race, caste, ethnicity etc. This paper attempts to explore the dichotomy between identity and Alterity, in the context of the hardships faced by the Native Americans in the main stream white society, through analysing Scott Momaday's novel, *House Made of Dawn*. Being a Native American, most of his works are centered on his Kiowa heritage. His upbringing in the Native reservations gave him first hand knowledge about the typical life of the Native American communities, their customs, rituals, and the struggles which they had to face due to the Relocation programmes implemented by the American government. *House Made of Dawn* (1968) was his debut novel and it narrates from several perspectives, the dilemma of a young Native American returning to his Pueblo-Jemez community, psychological and social trauma he had to undergo and eventually embracing his Native American identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity, alterity, quest, acceptance, affirmation of one's identity.

INTRODUCTION:

The question of identity and alterity, the dichotomy between the self and the other, has been a major concern in literature, especially in the postcolonial era. In most of the postcolonial works of literature, this opposition between the self and the other is poignantly visible. In the turn of the twentieth century, English literature has witnessed the emergence of Nationalist literature and the flowering of ethnic writing in English.



Writers like Leslie Marlon Silko, Scott Momaday, Bernard Malamud, Maurice Kenney, Maria Campbell, Oodgeroo Noonucal etc are writers who made a conscious effort to throw light into the indigenous tradition to which they belong, their culture, customs and rituals as well as the racial and ethnic issues which they had to encounter. Most of their writings explore the loss of self and the quest for identity and presents images of the self and the other.

N. Scot Momaday is a major Native American novelist, short story writer, essayist and poet. He belongs to the Kiowa tribe. His debut novel was *House Made of Dawn* (1968) which won him the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969 and caused a

tremendous impact on Indian writers and critical interpretations of Native American literature. The novel tells the story of Abel, a Pueblo Indian, a War veteran from World War II returns home in New Mexico alienated from both Pueblo culture and white America. In an interview, Momaday has commented on how Abel's trauma was shared by a 'tragic generation' of Indians who suffered 'a dislocation of the psyche.' He elaborates: "Almost no Indian of my generation or of 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 that was placed over the traditional world so abruptly and with great violence." In spite of the novel's many images of alienation, the final image suggests that Abel becomes reintegrated into his native Indian society which is suggested symbolically through the image of Abel taking part in the ritual of 'Dawn Running'.

The protagonist of the novel, Abel epitomizes the conflict between Native American culture and American mainstream culture. The novel also portrays how the Native Americans are being exploited by the white society, by compulsorily recruiting them as volunteers in the Second World War. They were driven out from their native soil and were made to live in alien lands, as part of the Reallocation programmes made by the US government. The novel sketches Abel's return to Walatowa and follows the incidents that leads up to his murdering of the albino, Juan Reyez, his imprisonment and his life in Los Angeles as part of his Rehabilitation, the humiliation and harassment to which he was subjected, owing to his Native American identity and finally his return to Walatowa and reclaims his sense of identity.

The novel is divided into a Prologue and four sections. The prologue portrays the end of the novel featuring Abel taking part in the ceremonial race of 'Dawn Running'. The prologue begins with the traditional invocation, that is, 'Dypaloh', with which a Walatowa Indian storyteller would begin. The title is derived from the Nightway Chant, which is a long and intricate healing ritual performed by Navajo Indians. The first section is entitled 'The Longhair' which is set in Walatowa in the year 1945, where the central character Abel is introduced, as he boards off a bus in a drunken stupor, on the way to his home from his army service. Abel's character is conveyed to the readers through a series of memories about his childhood and adolescence in Walatowa. The harrowing experiences of combat during the Second World War has had its effect on Abel and he feels totally distanced from the Pueblo community, but it doesn't mean that he has rejected his own culture. Abel has become susceptible to external influences on his return to Walatowa, which is clearly suggested through his relationship with Angela St. John, a white woman who is attracted by Abel's primitive masculine energy, and his murdering of the albino whom Abel considers as the incarnation of the evil.

The second section, 'The Priest of the Sun', is set in Los Angeles in 1952 and casts a number of Indians who were moved from their former homes on reservations to the city, in the name of relocation policies of the government. Abel who after his period of imprisonment is taken to Los Angeles as part of his rehabilitation. In the main stream white society, Abel is considered as the other by the whites and Abel himself feels as an alien in Los Angeles. There he had to face humiliation and harassment owing to his native American identity. The cop Martinez, who simply subjects Abel to physical torture and harassment while in Los Angeles, stands as a representative of the oppressive white world. Ironically the torture proves to be a turning point in Abel's life as it anticipates his return to Walatowa.

The third section 'The Night Chanter', again set in Los Angeles and begins with Benally, a Navajo Indian and this section narrates the story of Abel's departure from the city. The two become close friends and Benally introduces to Abel, the songs and chants associated with the Navajo healing ceremonies, the Beautyway and Night Chant.

The novel has a cyclical structure. It began with the word 'Dypaloh' suggesting that what follows is a story, and ends with the word 'Qtsedaba' which means that the story has come to an end. 'The Dawn Runner', novel's final section, is set in Walatowa and brings the narrative to a full circle as Abel takes part in the ritualistic dawn running, after the death of his grandfather Francisco. Though Abel struggles initially to keep his body in motion, because of the beating by the policeman, he runs beyond pain and as he runs, he sings under his breath the words of the Night Chant.

The immediate explanation for Abel's dislocation could be his harrowing experiences during the Second World War, but it is also noticeable that his sense of alienation also has its roots in his community itself. Abel

never knows his father, except that his father was a Navajo, an outsider, which made his family foreign and strange. He also doesn't know his maternal uncle, who is traditionally regarded as responsible for a male child's instruction in Pueblo Indian communities.

During the period of Second World War, young Native Americans were compulsorily recruited to the army and thereby they were subjected to ghastly experiences which created psychological trauma in their minds. Once Abel returned to his reservation after the War, he failed to make sense of what he was and completely lost sync to the rhythm of his earlier life in the reservation. On his return to Walatowa, Abel cannot simply retain his earlier self and a gap grows between his understanding of the Pueblo life and his ability to act in appropriate ways. Despite the alienation, Abel retains a deeply imbibed understanding of the importance of praying and singing, he says; "it was still there, like a memory in the reach of his hearing" (p.58). However, years pass by the time he becomes attuned to Pueblo life again by his act of killing an albino Indian and thereby imprisoned for murder.

The violent encounter between Abel and the albino is excellently dramatized by Momaday. The albino first appears on the Feast Day of Santiago, the Catholic patron saint of Walatowa. Initially he is described as 'large, lithe, and white skinned' and is referred to as a 'white man', but later we see through Angela's eyes that he is an albino. The albino realised how vulnerable Abel is during the Feast. Abel's entrapment is complete when he kills the albino three days after the Feast Day. Years later, while in Los Angeles, Abel confronts the Second figure of evil, the corrupt cop Martinez. From this confrontation, it could be assumed that Abel has failed to understand that evil need not be counteracted with violence. The incidents between the time leading up to the killing of the albino in 1945 and his spiritual epiphany as he lies in the shore in Los Angeles, thoroughly beaten in 1952, remains out of sync when compared to his fellow Walatowas understanding of evil. Abel murdered the albino as he considered the albino as an incarnation of the evil, for which there are evidences within the text, especially the diary of Fray Nicolas, a Catholic missionary, in which it is mentioned that an albino child named Juan Reyes was born in 1875. If this child and the albino remains the same, then Juan Reyes was seventy five years old at the time of the Feast and thereby provides further evidence that he is evil. Another explanation for Abel murdering the albino, is the latter's association with the white world. Thus it can be interpreted that the albino represents the external white world or the white man that exists within Abel.

The albino, Juan Reyes is a figure of malignant evil within the Pueblo community, even if the white man is a wicked influence who derives from someplace outside Pueblo society, he cannot be simply eradicated by Abel. Through the killing of the albino, Abel was trying to purify both himself and the Pueblo community of white influence in the aftermath of his participation in the Second World War. But there is the danger involved in committing such an act, as it would place the perpetrator at odds with the traditional view about Pueblo Indians, transgress their code of appropriate conduct when faced with evil and thereby endanger their subtle forms of resistance to the pressures of acculturation by calling attention to the so-called 'primitivism' of Indians in the mid-sized twentieth century. It is at the mid-point in the novel that Abel seems to develop an epiphanic understanding of the importance of ritual behaviour in causing as well as counteracting the negative influence of evil within the Pueblo community. For Abel, killing the albino was the most natural thing in the world and that he would do it again if a similar situation occurred. It was when he was lying on the shore in Los Angeles, broken-bodied, that he realises for the first time that he can go back to his native community and again can be a part of it. It was through Benally who imparts Abel with the Navajo ideals of personal harmony and cosmic balance that he becomes prepared spiritually to travel home. It is ironic that Benally, despite his intimate knowledge of Navajo ceremonial life is in reality estranged from such a life on the Navajo reservation. He and Abel have much in common as they both possess strong memories of their childhood experiences, each was brought up by a grandfather and also share a sense of having been 'right there at the centre of everything'. Benally is rather inconsistent in his view about life on and off the reservation and his narration is full of ambivalence and uncertainty. On one hand, he longs for home and become part of life beyond the reservation, and on the other hand, he rejects the old ways and embraces the new forms of spirituality by taking part in Tosamah's peyote ceremony. He enjoys the benefits of living in the city and at the heart of a culture of consumption- 'money and clothes and having plans and going someplace fast'- are considered far preferable to life on the reservation

where “there would be nothing there, just the empty land a lot of old people, going no place and dying off” (p.158,159). He advocates on the need to forget the way it used to be while consistently remembering the stories and experiences that provided meaning to his life on the reservation. Thus an analysis of Benally's character suggests the difficulty of going back to the Native American tradition, both physically and metaphorically, and pictures the divided loyalties of a generation of Indians who were relocated to cities.

Benally's dualistic thinking about life on reservation is in juxtaposition with that of Tosamah as he appears to occupy contradictory positions simultaneously with seeking to reconcile them. However Tosamah is an important figure for Abel's recovery as it was Tosamah who undertakes the appropriate trickster task of mocking and taunting Abel into self-knowledge, which was a painful process, but helps prepare Abel for his return to the Pueblo.

In addition to Benally and Tosamah, the third character who helps Abel in his healing process at Los Angeles was Angela St. Martin. She visits Abel in the hospital after being beaten by the cop, and tells Abel the story of an Indian born of a bear and a maiden. Divided opinions prevail regarding the Angela's role in curing Abel. In the opinion of Kenneth Lincoln, in the scenes set in 1945 Angela represents an ‘insidious threat’ to Abel's welfare because of her ‘spiritual emptiness’ (p.119). Kathleen Donovan in his work, *Feminists Readings of Native American Literature* argues that “Angela's sexuality betrays Abel by removing him from the healing possibilities of ritual and landscape.” (p.79).

CONCLUSION:

Scott Momaday, through this novel presents how one comes back and embraces his identity. It was Francisco's death that paved the way for Abel to return to his Native American existence by taking part in the ‘dawn running’ ritual which draws a final image of apparent completeness. The novel depicts the journey of a Native American in his quest for self- identity and portrays his hardships of being placed in an alien land and finally overcoming all the hurdles and asserting his identity as a Native American. Through the major characters of the novel such as Abel, Benally, Tosamah etc. Momaday attempts to portray the specific condition of the Native Americans , their loss of identity, hardships which they had to encounter owing to their condition of being treated as the other in the contemporary American society, their quest for self- identity and eventually their embracing and reaffirming of their Native American identity. Momaday undoubtedly succeeds in his attempt and provides with the readers of both Native and non- Native identities, an in-depth understanding of the holistic and ethical values that embody Indian cultures.

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