

The Influence of Indian tradition in “House Made of Dawn” by N. Scott Momaday

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Abstract

House Made of Dawn is based on Momaday's first-hand knowledge of the way of life in the place Jemez Pueblo. The author writes about the world he knows very well himself, in the American way, giving credibility to the understanding that the novel is a sincere confession of an American Indian, but not an exclusively one-sided viewpoint. We can also find in the novel a distinguishing feature making Indian moral and spiritual vision different from European or American, and that is, a deep identity rootedness with the sense of responsibility towards natural surroundings and tradition from which a wider community obtains energy. Indian principles are founded on the belief that human life is reflected in nature and vice-versa. At the same time, the separation of man from nature, land causes diseases-spiritual diseases, alienation and uncertainty, the impossibility of integration into other communities. Separating Indians from nature is expressed not only in their incapability of making economic and social progress; they are also incapable of making spiritual peace that is crucial for Indians as it results from their unity with the land and the spirit of the land. The relationship between an individual's life and the life of the land represents an intimate and interminable reciprocity – the land is reflected in people living with it.

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Rich Indian tradition has been part of the history of the United States of America for centuries, which is not the case with their literature as its written form appeared late. A tendency to maintain Indian tradition is what differentiates Indian literature from other peoples' works of literature. Indian life philosophy is based on preserving Indian customs, beliefs and language and passing them down to next generations. The literature of American Indians is influenced by the literature written in the English language, but it is still remote to a wider audience because of the animosity that stood across them many centuries ago. Knowing the spirit of North American Indians means knowing a different world, the world in which contrasts interwoven by joy and sorrow coexist; man, society and the world exist like one; imagination and ancient wisdom are combined in rituals, moralist stories, poems and myths; idealism and ideal qualities are combined with practical research. The first colonizers of the new world saw the opportunity which would help them regenerate their wealth, spirit and the power of their faith, but the means of achieving such a regeneration were extremely violent. In practice, a great damage was done to the literature of indigenous inhabitants through an attempt of creating multiethnic courses, which belittled the quality and complexity of ancient civilizations (Douglas,¹). The characteristics of Indians, such as mental maturity, versatility and intense calmness, are available to an ordinary man only by applying a profound social art. Indian societies, until the other half of the 19th century, survived a dark century up to the present time of a relative light. Those societies existed in a perfect ecological balance with woods, plains, deserts, rivers and the animal world.

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Indians managed to live happily in the times of material scantiness; they used their social institution and social system to protect themselves from external insecurity and establish conditions for internal security. Indian oral literature was developed to a high extent (stories, poetry, music, rituals, prayers). Praying would last even several hours until words were pronounced without mistakes, and this was necessary as Indians feared that magic wouldn't work and that community would be left without the food necessary for life. Navarre Scott Momaday, born in 1934. in Lawton, Oklahoma occupies a special place in the literature of American Indians. Being an autochthonous member of a minority group, he knew what problems, out of many that Indians had, should be given a special emphasis in his literary works. His work is founded on the oral tradition that has been nurtured by many Indian peoples. He realized that the stories developed from the tradition of the Kiowa tribe, he belonged to on his father's side, were fragile and that they would, if they weren't put down, be left at the mercy of time and become forgotten and lost. Having lived in rural areas, in reservations with beautiful nature, he gained experience through the languages of different tribes, but he was also acquainted with the strife that is torturing Indians even today – the identity problem; the young have their own idea about their identity, but the whole world conspired against them wanting them to be what they don't want to. As a writer, teacher, artist and narrator, Momaday dedicated his life to preserving oral tradition and the other forms of Indian culture. His deep interest and erudition are frequently attacked by comments from the American West, because it is not easy for Americans to criticize their own flaws. His novel *The Ancient Child* (1989) is about the split identity of a painter, of Kiowa origin, who was raised as a white. In the novel *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, through retelling the Kiowa tribe legends, he indicates their belonging to American cultural heritage. The common characteristic of all Momaday's works are poetic style and recognizable figurativeness. Today, N. Scott Momaday is a visiting professor at the Universities of Princeton and Columbia; he was the first professor to teach American literature at the University of Moscow. He is the author of thirteen books - novels, collected poems, literary critics and works on Indian culture. His first novel *House Made of Dawn* (1967) brought him the Pulitzer Prize.

He is one of the most prominent representatives and promoters of Indian literature. He introduced it into the mainstream of American literature and thus he paved the way to younger Indian writers such as L. Silko, S. Ortiz, J. Welsh and others. In the organic sense, Momaday brings to Western culture new views on Indian culture, to the same West that wanted to uproot that culture. As a writer he keeps hoping for the bright future of Indians who have been at the bottom for centuries because of diseases and persecutions so that their effort through which they managed to keep their own heritage often fascinates us. Momaday's first novel *House Made of Dawn* represents the most important literary contribution to the Indian literature breakthrough in the development of American and world literature. In spite of the invasion of the whites, who within sixty years managed to ruin Indian tradition thanks to their insensible politics governed by economic motives, Indians continued to exist. Even more, their spiritual and social hygiene won. Pride and humor, aristocratic values, the power of love and their faith in gods that do not hate overcame unspeakable pain, depopulation, the loss of home and any predictable future. Indian slow, long-lasting rituals, the breadth of life and spontaneous hilarity that don't leave anyone indifferent, vanquished a sorrow deeper than any creation of imagination, the sorrow of people completely conscious of their position, who watch the innumerable and worth of despise enemy ruin their world.

In the beginning, Momaday intended *House Made of Dawn* to be a collection of poems, then he turned them into the stories and finally he wrote the novel that is divided into five parts; the introduction and four parts, each of which has its own title and represents an organic whole for itself. Nevertheless, they make a unique amalgam based on Indian tradition and wisdom. The novel got its name after the prayer for spirit regeneration, which can be found in the third part and is put down almost as an invocation. The prayer begins with the word *Tsegihí*; it stands for the name of the canyon to the north of the San Juan river, the area inhabited by the Navajo tribe (Scarberry-Garcia,7). The prayer describes the land compared with the play of light and the rain falling on the ground. As the rain regenerates the land, at the same time the spirit of the person standing there is cured. The author implicates by the very title of the novel the area from which he took the material for the novel. *House Made of Dawn* is based on Momaday's first-hand knowledge of the way of life in the place Jemez Pueblo. The author writes about the world he knows very well himself, in the American way, giving credibility to the understanding that the novel is a sincere confession of an American Indian, but not an exclusively one-sided viewpoint. The events in the novel refer to real events as well, as for example, the incident that happened in Jemez according to which the murder motive in the first part of the novel is developed. Autochthonous beliefs and customs, real places and events were an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the novel. At the first sight, the theme of the novel is the loss of identity and the sense of ethnic affiliation of young Indians in modern American society.

We can also find in the novel a distinguishing feature making Indian moral and spiritual vision different from European or American, and that is, a deep identity rootedness with the sense of responsibility towards natural surroundings and tradition from which a wider community obtains energy. Indian principles are founded on the belief that human life is reflected in nature and vice-versa. At the same time, the separation of man from nature, land causes diseases - spiritual diseases, alienation and uncertainty, the impossibility of integration into other communities. Separating Indians from nature is expressed not only in their incapability of making economic and social progress; they are also incapable of making spiritual peace that is crucial for Indians as it results from their unity with the land and the spirit of the land. The relationship between an individual's life and the life of the land represents an intimate and interminable reciprocity – the land is reflected in people living with it. The first part of the novel follows the destiny of the main protagonist, Indian Abel. After participating in World War II, in which he won recognition because of his courage, he returned to the reservation in New Mexico where he grew up. Abel was totally emotionally ruined by the war. When he returned home, he was so drunk that he couldn't recognize his own grandfather Francisco. Now, his grandfather is an old man, with a limp leg, while in his youth he was a distinguished hunter and participant in the religious ceremonies of the community. Francisco raised Abel and his brother Vidal when their mother died. He passed down to Abel the sense of the community tradition and mythical values, but the war and other events broke Abel's bonds with the spiritual and physical unity as well as the bonds between the land and people, the bonds with the world known as "the house made of dawn". Father Olguin finds him a job in the village; he works for rich white woman Angela St. John who seduces him so that she could stay away from her own unhappiness. Abel realizes that the consequence of their relationship is such that he cannot stay in the reservation any more. He kills albino Indian Juan Reyes and is sentenced to prison. Opposing Abel's impressive memories from his childhood and the feeling of unity with nature he had at that time with the sense of being lost, Momaday describes the disappearing of the world that cannot survive within more and more limited frames. In addition to the description of Abel's healing, the novel offers the aspects of Francisco's, Tosamah's and Ben Benally's healing of the separation disease.

The main character's Abel role is finding, purchasing the faint faith of people in their homes as the source of benefit and healing so that the spiritual strength of the community could be renewed. In order to achieve his goal, Abel has to reunite himself with nature that is the source of life and identify himself with the land. In that sense an event from Indian tradition is used in the introduction of the novel – Abel's running in winter makes him a dawn runner at the end of the novel. So he completes the life circle, the circle which is the symbol of the incessant return to the beginning, as much in nature as in people's lives, – the incessant return to birth and dying that are inevitable elements of harmony. The introductory part of the novel, with its formulaic beginning, has the characteristics of a fairy tale, so Abel's running takes place somewhere in a mythic time by which Momaday instills again the Indian spirit of tradition in the novel. Apart from the fairy - tale beginning, Momaday introduces Indian stories and myths into the other parts of the novels as well. "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, 1). In the very introductory part of the novel, the main character's unity with nature is remarkable and it is also accentuated by his naked body – he grows from nature as the land that shaped nature, shaped man as well. Abel gained peace for the first time in the moment when he understood the symbiosis between his own soul and the unity with the universe and all its powers; he realized that the Great Spirit, that renewed the energy of each individual and restored his balance, was in the center of all events.

In the formal structure, in the first part of the novel *The Longhair*, the idea from the introduction, according to which land identity precedes human existence, is emphasized again. The story takes place in 1945, but the landscape of Walatova is introduced and described in details before mentioning people living in that area. The landscape described at the beginning of the first part exists independently, it has life in its own life, and precedes the other, secondary forms of life, including humans, as well, who learned how to survive together with nature, through centuries, at the same place. It is important to stress the continuity that is spreading in relation to life on earth, and it differs from the life of mortals. Momaday explicitly highlights the importance of nature by using certain tenses – when describing nature he uses the present tense emphasizing its constancy, and when he describes other details, he uses the perfect tense by which he implicates ephemerality. In the way of life of the people living in this area, the indirect strategy of coexistence with the land, that is, in this chapter, as old as human history, should be noticed. Francisco, Abel's grandfather embodies the traditional way of life of the Jemez culture.

His role is to pass down to Abel all knowledge about the place that, for centuries, has made it possible for people to live there proudly. Francisco's limping also symbolizes a partial loss of bonds with the tradition that he tries to restore together with his grandson. In Chapter I, entitled July 20, Abel is mentioned for the first time in the last sentence; he is too drunk to recognize his grandfather and sleeps till the dawn appearing which symbolizes a new strength and birth after a dark period. In the last chapter of the first part, entitled August 2, the scent of the censer and the rhythmic sound of the drums is interwoven with the description of the land that represents the age-long value, and the dancers who are coming out of the kiva in the afternoon fulfill the promise about the harmony of man and nature given a long time ago. As one of Francisco's roles in the novel is teaching Abel the traditional way of life that develops from the symbiosis with nature, one of the signs of Abel's spiritual disease is indicated in the first part, and it spreads through all five parts; his disease is manifested through his inability of remembering his own life in Jemez before World War II which results from the fact that he cannot accomplish harmony with the land. While Francisco is lying and is about to die, he remembers his life in Jemez and the relationship of people with the land. In the first and fourth part of the novel Francisco passes down to Abel the knowledge and old wisdom of the tribe, those truths that are deeply anchored in specific places on the land. Those are the same places Abel will return to, so that he could become their part thus becoming a dawn runner. Some animal figures that are deeply rooted in the Indian religion appear in the first part of the novel. The figures of an eagle and snake symbolize stages in Abel's life – his alienation from other people and the possibility of following the course of his spiritual disease. Abel identifies himself with the figure of the eagle, that, when on earth, cannot succeed. That night, while the others ate by the fire, he stole away to look at the great bird...the bird shivered...bound and helpless, his eagle seemed drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight. The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust. He took hold of its throat in the darkness and cut off its breath (Momaday, 22).

Abel identifies himself with the eagle, as in wider Indian culture, the eagle is a conventional metaphor for Indians in the whole, it symbolizes their pride. Abel suffers because of the period before leaving Jemez, his spiritual disease is related to the loss of his mother and his brother as well as the fear of losing the land. His fear grows out of his weakness because he cannot resist the underground power of the metropolis influencing him in such a way, that in the end, it takes his life. Abel's fear of impotence is personified in the eagle figure – in the beginning he admires eagles just because of their heavenly freedom and their ostensible lack of connection with the land, while the snake is an anchor, establishing contact with one place, and that is Walatova. The second and the third part of the novel, whose action take place in Los Angeles, include the narration of Abel's incapacity of achieving any success because of the fact that he is on a foreign terrain. In addition to Abel, the characters of Ben Benally and Tosamah appear in the novel; their existence is reduced to the minimum as well, since they are physically separated from the land they originate from – in their case, the land comprises individualism and cultural identity. The complete understanding of this part is that it portrays three Indians, physically separated from the environment they came from, which gave them peace and security. They try to adapt to the foreign culture surrounding them. When describing Ben's and Tosamah's attempts at adapting to it, Momaday highlights a motive that is not exclusively related to Abel and the disease he suffers from. The disease can be cured only by restoring experiences on the place they originate from. Ben and Tosamah are aware of the gap that can be filled only by the spirit of tradition.

The first part of the novel ends in Abel's killing the terrifying albino Indian who symbolizes the degeneration of Indian society. After the killing, Abel is sentenced to prison. His spiritual disease and dislocation aren't caused by his exposure to white people culture during World War II; it was the lack of spirit and apathy that caused his disease. The second part of the novel is about the period after Abel's serving the six-year sentence and his gradual decay in the white people environment of Los Angeles. As he failed to get along in Los Angeles, haunted more by his own demons than the hostility of the whites, Abel descended into alcoholism deeper and deeper. After he was cruelly beaten, he returned to the reservation with the broken soul and body. There, in the search for the "house made of dawn", he finds his spiritual peace. The third part of the novel is Ben's soliloquy in which he tells what happened to Abel in Los Angeles; thus Abel becomes a literary object. Having been brutally beaten and physically defeated, Abel was ready for the return to the reservation. He gave up working and looking for a job; he started asking money from Molly, had fights with Ben and became completely alienated from himself and his friends. Ben realized that Abel's new chance for healing was his return to the place he originated from, his return to the mythical values that his grandfather passed down to him. Abel's return home gave Ben the chance of healing as well. I prayed. He was going home, and I wanted to pray... And we were going together on horses to the hills.

We were going to ride out in the first light to the hills. We were going to see how it was, and always was, how the sun came up with a little wind and the light ran out upon the land (Momaday, 189). By leaving out the description of nature in the third part of the novel, the loss of tribal identity is highlighted, the motive of rain appearing in this part symbolizes washing mistakes and forgiving. In the last part of the novel, Abel returns to the reservation in New Mexico to take care of his dying grandfather who tells him the stories about the events from his youth; thus his grandfather emphasizes the importance of being connected with tribe tradition. When his grandfather dies, Abel puts on the traditional clothes, in a slow ritual ceremony, and covers the body with ashes, emphasizing his sorrow and the loss of a dear member of his family. At the dawn appearing, Abel starts running, he participates in the ritual his grandfather used to talk him about – the race of the dead. As he runs, he starts singing for himself and his grandfather; he finally returned to his people and found his place in the world. After the time spent in the foreign environment and the search for the knowledge of who he actually was, which, because of his mother's death and not knowing his father, he could never know, he finally found spiritual and physical peace in the place from which all wisdom originates, the place where the tradition, transmitted for centuries, was born. The novel *House made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday is characterized by the poetic descriptions of nature and its symbolic potentials as well as expert confrontations of Indian beliefs and legends with the trite prosaicness of modern, materialistic society (*Leksikon svjetske književnosti*, 305). The characters from the novel can't get along in the foreign environment, they are merely surviving and long for the return to the community symbolizing protection and peace.

The facts from the novel aren't presented chronologically, as they progressively took place, but within the boundaries of almost identical initial and final paragraphs of the novel, thus deriving the symbolic importance of the circular movement that is the result of traditional beliefs. A greater part of the novel takes place in a cyclic context; the obscure reality is softened by introducing the parts of the Navajo songs promising hope, beginning, a fresh start that is not present at the moment – the return of the dawn. Precisely by using the original words from the Navajo and Jemez languages, Momaday highlighted the idea of his work emphasizing the importance of the tribe as well as national identity in an individual's life given that man is a social being and is not determined to be alone. With the words *Quetsaba* and *Dypaloh*, the conventional expressions of the Jemez language, the writer, in order to complete his work, gives prominence to Indian tradition, not to oral literature. In the first sentences of the novel, it is indicated that the power of healing is in nature. It would be wrong to understand the national heritage the author talks about just as wise remarks; heritage represents an expression of a great life experience that was gathered for generations and, as the biggest treasure, was passed down from generation to generation. Indians remember their ancestors and they behave towards their own heritage with respect, because a man without tradition is like a tree without roots. In a symbolic sense, such a tree, represented by Abel in this novel, was discussed by Momaday. It is necessary to develop the understanding that oral tradition is the cradle of each multiethnic society, it passes down the wisdom of generations; it is a compass for finding a way in the modern, confusing world. Tradition is a support for education and entertainment, and, at the same time, an inspiration for the community.

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