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The Intersection of Native American Spirituality and Modernity in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*

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Abstract:

N.Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, published in 1968, is a landmark in Native American literature that delves deeply into the complexities surrounding Native American identity in a modern context. The novel, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969, is renowned for its poetic language, rich use of symbolism, and exploration of the themes of tradition, identity, and the effects of modernity on indigenous culture. This paper aims to examine how these themes are woven into the protagonist Abel's journey, suggesting that the novel serves as both a personal narrative and a broader reflection of the Native American experience. The characteristic feature of 'House Made of Dawn' is that its Narrative Paradigm is circinate. The span of time of the incidents we see occurring in the introduction is never described. *House of Dawn* advocates the idea of embellishment and hope, the dawn of a new day, a chance for development and happiness. Sunrise is a representation of birth and rebirth, of awakening. Transpire and Resurrection. A detached, almost clinical voice narrates the passage. This omniscient narrative presence dominates the chapter, yet it seamlessly shifts between different points of view, most notably Abel's. At one point, it even delves into a first person stream of consciousness, offering a direct glimpse into the characters' innermost thoughts. The narrative portrays the harrowing struggle of Abel, the novel's protagonist, whose identity is shattered by the clash between the native American world and the encroaching dominance of the white man's world. The return to tribal roots emerges as the sole path through which lost identity can be reclaimed, offering the possibility of reconnection with a deeper, ancestral sense of self. The novel draws heavily from Momaday's intimate knowledge of life at Jemez Pueblo. Like the protagonist Abel, Momaday navigated life both within and outside the boundaries of mainstream society, having grown up on a reservation before pursuing education and teaching at prominent universities. In the novel, Momaday masterfully blends personal experience with creative imagination- a skill instilled in him by his parents.



Keywords: Modernity, Tradition, Alienation, Identity, Symbols.

Introduction:

The opening line of the book encapsulate the title of the Novel ' House of Dawn', making reference to an old traditional Navajo chant that is used in particular for healing sick people. The Navajo regard sickness as friction, without making extreme difference between physical and mental illness. The book suggests that residing in one's native land fosters a profound and meaningful connection to one's home, a bond that outsiders—deemed "alien and inferior"—are unable to fully attain. This connection, in turn, aids individuals in discovering their true identity. In Chapter 10, titled *The Night Chanter* (February 20, set in 1952 Los Angeles), the narration shifts to the first-person perspective of Ben. He recounts bidding farewell to a man, implied to be Abel, on a rain-soaked train platform. Abel's hands are bandaged, and he is still recovering from the injuries sustained in the preceding section. After Abel boards the train, Ben worries that others might be frightened by his battered appearance and, as a result, may withhold assistance if Abel is in need. This thought leaves Ben feeling a deep sense of loneliness. The novel presents numerous examples of Native American storytelling, with N. Scott Momaday drawing heavily upon his cultural heritage and family history to provide rich and vivid depictions of New Mexico. Through the use of key characters and the setting, the book emphasizes the theme of cultural expression through storytelling, which serves as a cornerstone of Native American identity. In *House Made of Dawn*, Navarre Scott Momaday explores the journey of a young Native American man who has lost all sense of self and connection to his origins. However, through a series of pivotal events and the power of storytelling, he gradually rediscovers his heritage and reconnects with his culture.

Tradition vs. Modernity: The Struggle for Identity

One of the primary themes in House Made of Dawn is the conflict between tradition and modernity, which is vividly portrayed through the character of Abel. After serving in World War II, Abel returns to the small town of Walatowa (Jemez Pueblo), only to find himself disconnected from both his native community and the larger American society. This sense of alienation stems from the clash between his traditional Kiowa heritage and the powerful forces of modernity that threaten to obliterate it.



Momaday uses the landscape as a metaphor for this conflict. The novel opens with a vivid depiction of the natural world, which is deeply intertwined with Native American spirituality:

"Dawn came, and the earth was like iron; I saw it come, the first light in the land of the canyon and mesa, the ancient sun setting upon the hills. But I did not hate the world; I saw it plainly in the manner of the old man who came to see it in his own time." (Momaday, 4)

The "ancient sun" and "land of the canyon and mesa" are more than mere physical landscapes; they hold profound spiritual significance. For Abel, these landscapes represent a vital connection to his ancestors and the traditional ways of life that have been passed down through generations.

In contrast, urban environments, such as Los Angeles, are depicted as places of alienation and destruction. When Abel moves to Los Angeles, he experiences profound disorientation:

"He did not belong to the town, and he did not belong to the land. He was a stranger to it all, and it was a stranger to him. He saw nothing of his old life in it, nothing of the familiar." (Momaday, 70)

The city symbolizes the forces of modernity that have little regard for Native American traditions. Abel's inability to find his place in this environment mirrors the larger struggle of Native Americans to preserve their cultural identity in a society that often disregards or erases it.

The Role of Storytelling and Oral Tradition: A Path to Healing

Storytelling and oral tradition are integral to *House Made of Dawn*, functioning as tools for cultural preservation and healing. Momaday, drawing from his Kiowa heritage, incorporates Native American oral narratives into the novel's structure. This theme is deeply reinforced throughout the novel for several reasons. Firstly, Abel and the Native American priests recount numerous cultural and historical narratives within **House Made of Dawn**. These stories, central to their spiritual and communal life, echo the oral traditions that N. Scott Momaday himself absorbed during his childhood. Much like the priests who impart their teachings through sermons, Momaday learned these tales orally, preserving the timeless tradition of storytelling within the Native American culture. These stories are not mere



background elements; they are crucial to understanding the characters' identities and their struggles.

Francisco, Abel's grandfather, is a key figure in the novel who embodies the significance of oral tradition. As a keeper of the old stories and rituals, Francisco connects Abel to the cultural heritage of his people. His stories are rich in symbolic meaning and are often tied to the land:

"He remembered the old stories of the people, the legends of the land and the sky, and the way of things in the world. He had heard them all his life, and he had learned to repeat them as they were told to him, with reverence and care." (Momaday, 57)

These stories are not simply historical accounts; they are living traditions that shape the community's understanding of the world and their place within it. For Abel, these stories represent a crucial link to his cultural identity, one that he struggles to reclaim throughout the novel.

The significance of oral tradition is further highlighted in the character of Tosamah, the Priest of the Sun, who delivers a sermon critiquing Western culture's dismissal of Native American ways of understanding. Tosamah recalls the wisdom of his grandmother, who understood the world through stories and oral teachings:

"She had learned to listen in her own way, to listen and to remember. She listened to the old stories, and in them, she heard the truth of her people." (Momaday, 85)

Tosamah's sermon underscores the power of language and storytelling in preserving cultural identity. The novel suggests that the loss of oral tradition leads to a loss of identity and a disconnection from the community and the land. Abel's journey can be seen as a quest to reconnect with these stories and, through them, to heal from the traumas he has experienced.

Alienation and Identity: The Search for Belonging

The theme of identity is central to *House Made of Dawn*, with Abel's alienation serving as a powerful metaphor for the broader experience of Native Americans in the 20th century. Abel's disconnection from his community, his body, and the land reflects the deep impact of colonization and modernity on Native American identity. In Chapter 10, titled *The Night Chanter* (February 20, set in 1952 Los Angeles), the narration shifts to the first-person



perspective of Ben. He recounts bidding farewell to a man, implied to be Abel, on a rain-soaked train platform. Abel's hands are bandaged, and he is still recovering from the injuries sustained in the preceding section. After Abel boards the train, Ben worries that others might be frightened by his battered appearance and, as a result, may withhold assistance if Abel is in need. This thought leaves Ben feeling a deep sense of loneliness.

Abel's alienation is evident from the outset of the novel. After returning from the war, he feels out of place in his community. His silence and withdrawal are indicative of his internal struggle:

"He had been gone a long time, and he had returned only to be lost again, lost in a strange, crooked universe." (Momaday, 15)

This "strange, crooked universe" is a world where the old ways of life are no longer viable, and the new ways offer no comfort or sense of belonging. Abel's physical and emotional scars symbolize the deeper cultural wounds inflicted by colonization and the marginalization of Native Americans.

The novel explores how this alienation manifests in various forms, including Abel's disconnection from his own body. His physical wounds are not just remnants of war but also represent his fractured identity. The episode where Abel kills the albino man is particularly significant:

"He had laid him down and covered him with the earth, and he had gone away alone into the dawn." (Momaday, 101)

This violent act is a pivotal moment for Abel, symbolizing his break from the past and his further descent into isolation. The albino man represents a figure of corruption, and Abel's act of killing him can be seen as an attempt to reclaim a sense of agency or identity, though it ultimately leads to further alienation.

However, the novel does not leave Abel in this state of despair. In the final section, Abel begins to reconnect with his cultural roots and the land. His participation in traditional rituals signifies his acceptance of his identity and his place within his community. The novel concludes with Abel running toward the dawn, a powerful symbol of renewal and hope:

"He was running, running; and his body crackled, and he was all sinew and bone. He was running, and under his breath he began to sing." (Momaday, 212)



This act of running symbolizes Abel's return to his cultural roots and his acceptance of his identity. It represents his reclaiming of identity and his rejection of the forces that seek to erase his heritage.

The Symbolism of the Dawn: A New Beginning

The motif of the dawn is a recurring symbol throughout the novel, representing new beginnings and the possibility of healing. The title itself, *House Made of Dawn*, refers to a Navajo prayer that celebrates the harmony between the individual and the universe. Dawn symbolizes renewal, both for Abel as an individual and for the Native American community as a whole.

Throughout the novel, dawn is associated with key moments of realization and transformation for Abel. For instance, after the death of his grandfather Francisco, Abel experiences a moment of clarity at dawn:

"He got up in the gray light, and the dawn was far away in the east. He could see the black hill lying far beyond the fields, and he knew that the day would be full of dust and heat."
(Momaday, 204)

This suggests that, even in the face of grief and loss, there is a sense of continuity and endurance. The "gray light" of dawn represents a moment of transition, where the darkness of night gives way to the possibility of a new day. For Abel, this is a moment of reconciliation with his past and his cultural identity.

The novel's conclusion, where Abel is seen running toward the dawn, is the culmination of this theme. It signifies not just his personal redemption but also the survival and resilience of Native American identity in the face of adversity. The act of running toward the dawn is a powerful image of renewal, suggesting that, despite the challenges faced by Native Americans, there is hope for a future where their traditions and identities can continue to thrive.

Conclusion

House Made of Dawn is a profound exploration of the themes of tradition, identity, and the conflict between modernity and indigenous culture. Through the character of Abel, N. Scott Momaday presents a narrative that speaks to the resilience of Native American identity



in the face of immense challenges. The novel's use of landscape, storytelling, and symbolism all contribute to a rich and nuanced portrayal of the Native American experience.

Abel's journey from alienation to the reclaiming of his identity symbolizes the broader struggle faced by many Native Americans. Ultimately, Momaday suggests that healing and wholeness are achieved through the reclamation and preservation of cultural heritage. The novel's emphasis on oral tradition, the symbolism of the dawn, and the connection to the land all underscore the idea that cultural survival is possible even in the face of overwhelming forces of modernity. *House Made of Dawn* remains a vital text for understanding the complexities of Native American identity and the ongoing struggle to maintain cultural integrity in a rapidly changing world. Momaday's work continues to inspire and challenge readers, offering a powerful testament to the enduring strength of Native American traditions.

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