

## **Journey to Recover Identity in House Made of Dawn**

Jiuju Ren<sup>\*</sup>

Foreign Studies College, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning, China

renjiuju@126.com

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**Abstract:** The publishing of *House Made of Dawn* by contemporary writer Scott Momaday has aroused wide attention on Native American literature in American society. This novel is regarded as the first breakthrough of Native American literature into the mainstream. It is deeply rooted in the ancient cultural tradition of Native Americans, and explores the living conditions and mentality of contemporary Native American youth in the American society. This paper analyzes how Abel re-established Native American belief and recovered his identity by traditional Native American culture, and discusses the important role played by tribal lands and traditional rituals in seeking identity.

### **1. Introduction**

*House Made of Dawn*, the first work by a Native American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1969) is now viewed as American classic. Many critics consider it as the finest Native American novel. It tells a story of the dilemma of a young Native American struggling to survive between his traditional tribal world and modern industrialized society. The author, Momaday, is a 7/8 blood Native American with two highly educated intellectual parents, thus has a better prospect for a successful and truly bicultural education than many young American Indians. After receiving high education in the white man's world, unlike many native Americans who find themselves trapped between two cultures, he could draw on the benefits of both and move smoothly from these two cultures. Therefore, this paper explores the theme of identity recovery within both contexts of the large Euro-American literary tradition and the vast Native American oral traditions.

### **2. Identity Crisis**

The story is a depiction of the wretched struggle of Abel, the novel's protagonist, when his identity was lost as a result of the conflicts between the Native American world and the White Man's world. Abel epitomizes the native Americans' identity crisis, a prevailing phenomenon after World War II, when many veterans struggled to reintegrate into their native communities but failed. Abel too is unable to find his way back into his tribal community. Vacillation between two cultures nearly destroys him, and the recovery of identity comes only when he rebuilds his connection with his tribal heritage. Conspicuously, the only way of survival for Native Americans relies on the continual reassessment of their positions in the two worlds.

Abel's identity crisis can be divided into three stages. First, from Abel's childhood to his leaving for war; second, from Abel's coming back from war to his trial for murdering an albino; third, from Abel's release from prison to the time he is both physically and mentally hurt in Los Angeles; fourth, from Abel's hurt to his last revival to new life. There are two gaps or absence in the narrative of these four stages: the experience in the war and in prison. Absence here symbolically indicates a sense of incompleteness, or existence in a disharmonized stated.

The first stage is Abel's childhood, the most harmonious time in his life. Through his grandfather, he acquires the tribal knowledge of the landscape, the sun and the rhythms of Native American life. Though it seems that he lives in harmony with the tribal world, there exist some underlying elements which will trigger conflict. His father, unknown to him, an outsider of the tribe, gives him

the position of a born outsider of the community. His mother and brother's death increases his isolation. The lack of family bond keeps Abel from fully integrating into the community. As Abel grows up, he finds it more difficult to adapt to tribal customs. He kills the eagle in the eagle hunting ceremony because he cannot understand the depriving of the eagle's freedom for the benefit of the community. What he did is inappropriate according to Native American tradition and it symbolize for his alienation from his tribal heritage.

In the second stage, Abel comes back because he is unable to fit into the mainstream American society. He is the "chief" in his white comrade-in-arms' eyes, and is denied by them. In the game of Chicken Pull and the Pecos Bull Dance back home, his identity confusion intensifies when he misunderstands the ritual practices of his tribe and stabs the albino.

In the third stage, under the heavy burden of the past and the pressure of city life, Abel fails to integrate into this new environment. At this stage, Abel still suffers from identity confusion since he cannot achieve true intimacy with Milly and Ben. But in the death-rebirth beach scene, Abel's catches sight of men running after evil, which helps him to understand the meaning of tribal ritual and enables him to realize that his failure in integrating into Native American life has been the cause of his identity confusion. He realizes that the Native American world is the only place where he can live a meaningful life and find his identity. So he goes back to his own community.

In the last stage, the novel moves to Abel's final resurrection or fixing of identity. The result of the Night Chant from Ben and the bear-hunting story from Francisco help to restore the intactness Abel has lost in his identity crisis.

There are also many symbols indicating Abel's experience of identity crisis. Momaday stresses Abel's position between the two cultures with his shoes. The shoes are symbols of fashion in the white man's world and are weird in the eyes of Native Americans. In some Pueblo communities, shoes can be worn only when heels are cut off, because otherwise they will hurt the sacred mother earth on which the tribe's existence depends. However, Abel does not agree with the tribal view, to him shoes are just some kind of artwork like "the work of a good potter or painter or silversmith". In addition, that Abel fails to reach and cross the fence also symbolize for his inability to overcome the barriers between him and the mainstream society. After catching sight of the runners after evil and realizing the source of his confusion, Abel finally gets the power to come to the fence.

### **3. Rediscovering Identity**

#### **3.1 Nature**

Nature and the American landscape are central features of Momaday's writings and main ways for Abel to recover in his identity crisis. Attachment to their homelands has been a powerful source of strength among Native Americans. They see their existences shaped and sustained physically and spiritually by the land. For Navajos, each landform contains an inner form. The inner forms are the human-like forms that are in-standing ones that animate all of creation. These forms possess the power of life and environment, shape the character of outer forms, and bring strength. A skillful storyteller from a culture of oral tradition produces a profound sense of well-being in the listeners by bringing the two landscapes together. When the land is internalized, the listener experiences a pervasive sense of congruence within himself and also with the world. This sense of congruence promotes healing of the inner self.

Water, according to Native American tradition, is a symbol of creation, fertility and potential life. Abel's approach to and connection with water imply that his state of alienation will fade away and he will possibly reintegrate into his tribal culture.

The fish's journey back to the sea is symbolic of Abel's struggle to survive. Abel's transformation is represented through his connection with the fish. They are similar in the way that they both are laying on the beach and are helpless creatures removed from their homes. The fish's suffering and struggling reflect Abel's pain and his fight against fate after he has become aware of his dilemma. When Abel finally escapes from death, the fish too go back in the sea safely, which indicates that Abel will also find a way back to his tribal community.

The moon is another revelation on Abel's journey to recover identity. His connection with the moon is achieved when he realizes that the moon has the power to control the universe. This recognition is in line with Native Americans' belief that all elements are interrelated in the universe. With this understanding, Abel realizes that he too is caught in the law of universe and should have a foothold in it---that is his homeland.

### 3.2 Language

Momaday believes that man's existence and reality find their fullest manifestation in language. "You grow up into an understanding of language and through that to an understanding of yourself. That's how it has to happen. We are determined by our language; it holds the limits of our development. We can exist within the development of language and not without. The more deeply we can become involved in language, the more fully we can exist. Man has consummate being in language, and there only. The state of human being is an idea, an idea which man has of him. Only when he is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself."

Momaday shows Abel's sense of isolation in the Native American tribe by showing the protagonist's state of aphasia. As described in the novel, when Abel wanted to talk to his grandfather, he was unable to communicate because he lost the ability to express his thoughts in the language of his own tribe. Although he realized that by speaking to his grandfather in the tribal language, he could establish a connection with him and escape his identity crisis, he simply could not. The lack of language not only hindered Abel's ability to communicate with the outside world, but also frustrated his efforts to return to his Native American identity. And while walking alone in the canyon, Abel tried to awaken his tribal consciousness by singing an Indian tribe's creation ballad, but he forgot the words and couldn't find the tune.

Sacred stories from oral tradition carries a healing effect because they symbolically internalize images of the land within the listeners. By listening to the stories, the listeners learn about their own relationship with their homeland. And it is this knowledge of one's place in relationship to all else in the natural world that reintegrates an individual and fosters survival. We can find a best manifestation of Momaday's viewpoint towards language in the high lightened function of storytelling as a healing power.

On his grandfather's death, Abel sat by his bedside and listened to his stories. For Native Americans, stories are an effective way for individuals to find cultural identity in interlinked time and space. When they listen and tell stories, they do not think of themselves as merely recalling events that took place in ancient mythological times, but as representations of the mythologies of the beginning of creation circulating through time and space to reconstruct the harmonious unity between individuals and tribes and the universe. Although Abel could not understand Maitreya's grandfather's words, he was able to appreciate the tribal traditions and cultural spirit conveyed in the story and draws from it the divine power to overcome his imbalance.

### 4. Conclusion

In this novel, Momaday explores how Native Americans adhere to their traditional values and beliefs in the contemporary society, and recover the state of balance. With the help of this novel, the author carried forward the traditional Native American culture and showed the time-honored vitality, eternal charm and infinite potential of Native American culture to people.

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