

THE ROLE OF ORAL TRADITION IN SCOTT MOMADAY'S *HOUSE MADE OF DAWN* : FROM THE DECONSTRUCTION OF COLONIALIST DISCOURSE TO A CONSTRUCTIVE SUBVERSION.

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Résumé

House Made of Dawn est une œuvre romanesque où l'auteur, s'inspirant de la tradition orale, explore les mythes, légendes et coutumes de sa société amérindienne. Notre objectif dans le cadre de cet article est de montrer qu'au-delà du fait d'être un moyen de transmission et de sauvegarde de l'expérience culturelle et ancestrale, la tradition orale constitue une source historique qui permet à l'écrivain de rétablir la vraie image de son peuple et, partant de déconsidérer les préjugés colonialistes.

Mots clés : *Tradition orale, conte, culture, coutume, déconstruction, subversion constructive.*

Abstract

House Made of Dawn is a narrative in which the author takes inspiration from the oral tradition and explores the myths, legends and customs of his native American society. This article is intended to show that beyond the fact of being a means of transmitting and safeguarding the ancestral cultural experience, the oral tradition constitutes an historical source which enables the writer to restore the real image of his folks, and consequently, brings discredit upon European colonialist prejudices.

Key-words: *Oral tradition, storytelling, culture, customs, deconstruction, constructive subversion*

INTRODUCTION

Although Vanspanckeren's statement is undeniably true that "American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures,"¹ the fact of the matter remains that native American literature has long been marginalized — and, to some extent, is still waiting to be fully recognized. The present article aims at analyzing the place of native oral tradition in *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by Navarre Scott Momaday, one of the most outstanding contemporary Indian writers.

In 1969 Momaday won the Pulitzer for *House Made of Dawn*. The novel actually deals with the story of a young Native American named Abel who is caught between two worlds—his native heritage on the reservation and the industrialized world of contemporary America in Los Angeles. In writing this fiction, Momaday draws his inspiration from his own childhood experiences of growing up on reservations through the tumultuous period of World War II. His depiction of Abel illustrates the difficult experience of many young native Americans during the twentieth century: Indian relocation efforts, the struggle to enter the industrial work force, the

isolation of reservations, and the harmful effects of alcoholism. In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday uses a combination of oral tales and personal imagination to eloquently pass on the stories his Kiowa fathers² told him as a child - a task to which he also felt bound.

Beyond Momaday's keen interest in transmitting or safeguarding his ancestral cultural experience by means of writing, his narrative may be perceived as a formal reinstitution and praise for Indian oral tradition. This perception seems to be in contradiction with how native cultures were interpreted and presented by European explorers in the past. For indeed, there was a good deal of uncertainty about the image of indigenous inhabitants of America, whether they were brutal savages or had any culture. The dual image of the noble and the ignoble savage that flourished in the eighteenth century constantly represented Indians as cannibals and primitive beings. This image of Indians as uncivilized and barbarous people is still shown on screens. Because it is directly or indirectly denying such assertions, Momaday's narrative appears as a deconstructive process. For, as Cuddon asserts:

A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying...it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single 'stable' meaning. Thus a text may 'betray' itself."³

The idea that literature is by essence a language of connotation⁴ leads us to take in for questioning the potentially subversive power of Momaday's text in so far as *House Made of Dawn* exposes the glaring contradictions of the wording and its understanding. In other words, if the author uses native oral traditions to inform his fiction, doesn't his text undo the colonial discourse and restore the true image of Indians and their historical realities?

Proceeding from an examination of this fundamental interrogation, the following reflection intends first, to show how native American culture is expressed through storytelling and then, scrutinize the writer's aesthetic approach to see whether it is

not socially and historically oriented, or politically motivated.

I. THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE OF RETROSPECTION AND ORAL CULTURE

A method of artistic expression whose exploration certainly enables the reader to observe oral culture in *House Made of Dawn* is retrospection as the writer has frequently recourse to analepsis or anaphora⁵. To present his story, Momaday resorts to events and scenes prior to the episode presented in the fiction. The narrator is not an actor who actively takes part in the human experiences that he reports. He passes on stories he has observed or heard, or been told about Abel, the protagonist and his community. His heterodiegetic narration⁶ is centered upon the central character. If such a narration may considerably limit the predictive function of the heterodiegetic narrator, it allows the storyteller a much wider possibilities of looking back at past events or referring to the point of view and knowledge of other persons.

What should be established at the very outset is that those individuals who serve as moral resources to Momaday's novel are characters, that is to say fictitious persons even though they may reflect a certain reality. They are essential vectors in the literary and artistic creation. They represent the driving-force around whom the events in the novel spiral forth. Through them, the novelist conveys his ideological and artistic perspectives. It is in this respect, they may be seen beyond their literal representation as the expression of an aesthetic which materializes and upholds the author system of ideas.

1.1. Father Olguin

In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday conceives Father Olguin as a priest who is very heedful of memory and tradition of his church believers at the mission in Walatowa, New Mexico. The writer undoubtedly chooses a religious figure to express his thought because tradition rests on spirituality. In fact, as a spiritual leader who is trained to advise, teach and perform special religious acts, Father Olguin learns and comprehends many things about the history of the people of the tribe within which he serves. His wide knowledge of the past serves as

a springboard for Momaday's narrative art.

Through the voice of the spiritual leader, the writer informs the reader of memories of the Native past. An illustrative example of his representation of tribal memory is the feast of Santiago, an important cultural celebration in the Kiowa community. In that regard, he evokes the exploits of Santiago who is considered as a saintly person by his people and neighbourhood. If the information given by the priest about the bold, adventurous act of Santiago stands as a testimony of a specific fact that took place in the past, the novelist shows that the source of the legend can be retraced in a distant time comparatively to the narrative present tense. The juxtaposition of flashbacks and the use of the present tense are very expressive.

Speech constitutes a fundamental element by means of which speakers flaunt themselves. It also enables writers to take their distance from their characters. This idea can be justified in Momaday's book. In fact, to tell the reader about the origin of the feast, the author uses as an epigraph: "*This, according to Father Olguin.*"⁷ This inscription at the beginning of the chapter actually indicates that the story, which is going to be told, is not from Momaday, the writer but from Father Olguin, a character / narrator who also learns it from his elders and predecessors at the mission in Walatowa. Father Olguin is portrayed as a person who is highly cognizant of memory. Although he gets a great deal of information on the people through the memoirs of his priestly precursors, the myth of Santiago and many other stories of the tribe are verbally transmitted. Thus, the *analeptic* evocation of the history of Santiago demonstrates the significance of oral culture in Momaday's process of a reconstruction of the past. Oral culture may be construed as a way of transmitting history, literature or law from one generation to the next without a writing system. It is an efficient tool that immortalizes peoples by preserving their history. Arguing about the importance of oral tradition for the preservation of historical sources, Jan Vansina asserts that "In those parts of the world inhabited by peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past, and even among peoples who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones, are based on oral traditions."⁸

In Momaday's novel, the knowledge and perpetuation of the Kiowa traditions illustrate the powers of recollection of successive generations. Father Olguin is very conscious of his role of safeguarding the tribal culture. He is obsessed with the past as we may notice through his reading of the parish records of his predecessors: "He [Father Olguin] took up the letter carefully and unfolded it. He felt curiously busy with it, as if it were his own creation and he were setting it down as a testament to his faith." (p.45) Father Olguin is fascinated by his precursors' diaries because for him, the past is certainly the most valuable thing that must be kept and taught to future generations. In this connection, it is noteworthy that he makes arrangements for the commemoration of Santiago, which is originally a feast of pagans, to become a great success. He invites Angela St. John, a newcomer in Walatowa and presides over the ceremony. His preoccupation attests his devotion to the tribal ancestral folklore and belief. Because of his

attachment to the Kiowa clannish tradition and his position as role model for many people, the narrative voice remarks that: "Father Olguin was consoled now that he had seen to the saint's heart [...] He would become a figure, an example in the town." (p.47-8) Following the case of Father Olguin whose evocation of the past serves as a support for the narrative, the image of Tosamah, another traditional leader forcefully brings out the writer's technique of retrospection.

¹ Kathryn Vanspankeren, *Outline of American Literature*, U.S.A.: The United States Information Agency, 1998, p.3.

² In his memoir, Momaday describes how his great-grandfather, Pohd-lohk passed on the heritage of a Kiowa storyteller to him. (Confer *The Names: A Memoir*. U.S.A.: Harper & Row, 1976).

- Momaday is a Kiowa. The Kiowas are a Native American tribe of the southern plains. They are known to have lived in the Kootenay, Region of British Columbia, Canada, to have migrated to Western Montana, and then continued to move until they inhabited present day Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

³ J.A. Cuddon quoted in Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*

(Second Edition). Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 2002, p.72.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Essais Critiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1964, pp.262-264.

⁵ *Analepsis* or *anaphora* are used to designate any event or scene evoked prior to what is currently being presented in the narrative. (Cf. Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil, 1972).

⁶ To have more information about the notion of *heterodiegetic narration*, please refer to Gerard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil, 1972).

⁷ Navarre Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1968). New York: Perennial Classics, 1999, p. 34. All

subsequent references to this novel will directly appear in the text.

⁸ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H.H Wright. U.S.A: Transaction Publishers, 2006, p. 1.

I.2. Tosamah or the Priest of the Sun

Momaday purposefully entitles the second part of his book "The Priest of the Sun" in order to show how significant Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah or the Priest of the Sun is in the narrative. His significance probably derives from the fact that he is representative of the writer's literary and aesthetic approach. Naturally, the character is not the creator of the fiction. As Genette argues, the character is different from the author; and the person who writes the fiction is not the one who tells the story. Yet, a character may convey his creator's ideology in the same way that a narrator's discourse hides the writer's message.

To present Tosamah in *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday resorts to what Genette calls *heterodiegetic autobiography*¹. In fact, the Priest of the Sun is sometimes presented as a narrator and at other times as a character. As a narrator, he relates stories, which directly or indirectly concern him or which are about his forbearers and his tribe. As a participant in the dynamism of the literary creation, he represents an archetype who gives the reader an insight into the author's intent to save remembrance of his tribal oral stories. In both cases, he stands as a spokesman whose speech for oral culture is in line with the writer's recalling of the past in the fiction.

If writers create characters and narrators to materialize their visions of the world and art, it may be important to know the functions and the actions of those invented beings. For indeed, according to critics such as Barthes and Hamon, literary creatures have to be analyzed in relation with their acts, but not their mere identity as beings because what matters is their meanings as signs. In light of this, it may be interesting to have a look at what Tosamah does and says. As a pastor, Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah does not only perform special acts of religion or serves deity, but he also gives sermons. His sermons are vocally addressed on historical, religious and moral subjects. Although, it is based on stories, myths and legends, oral tradition takes

shape from the word, which is as old as creation. In this regard, Tosamah asserts at the very outset of his sermon that: "*In principio erat Verbum.*" (p.80) If this assertion serves as pretext for the preacher to stress the reliability of oral tradition through the importance of the word, it also enables the reader to perceive the orator's opinion on Genesis. As he addresses his believer audience, the Priest of the Sun declares: "Think of Genesis. Think of how it was before the world was made." (pp.80-81) Paradoxical though it may seem, the priest affirms that he does not draw his inspiration from *The Bible* when he makes his sermon and theology of the Truth. In support of this, he notes: "There was nothing *The Bible* says." (p.81) For Tosamah, the Bible does not reveal anything, but it simply confirms what his ancestors know about the fact that: "In the beginning was the Word."(p.82)

Though Tosamah's sermon and theology of the Truth may appear as a rupture which situates Momaday's narrative within the retrospection framework, the priest's objection to the Bible as his source of inspiration has double meanings. The first interpretation may be related to the Pastor's intention to value his forbearers' knowledge prior to the advent of European explorers with the Bible in America. In this connection, the Priest of the Sun appears both as the defender of his cultural heritage and the "Sun" which lights the way for his believers and the young Native generation. The second explanation may stem from the fact that he intends to make us see that the word is holy and universally true. With regard to this, he acknowledges the relationship between human existence and the word in the sense that the former generates the latter from which it also proceeds. Human history may be explained only by means of the word whose origin can be retraced since creation. The history of the word cannot be dissociated from that of the Creator, as Tosamah states: "[...], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (p.82) The word is an instrument of creation in the sense that it gives birth to language which produces meaning and helps people to communicate and get knowledge.

Oral tradition rests on storytelling and the aesthetic of reception. In his process of presenting the Priest

¹ Gerard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit*. Paris, Seuil, 1983, p.72.

of the Sun, the author returns to the character childhood experience through flashbacks. In fact, Tosamah has been influenced by Aho, his grandmother. The old woman stands as a model for her grandson who vehemently asserts:

My grandmother was storyteller; she knew her way around words. She never learned to read and to write, but somehow she knew the good of reading and writing; she had learned how to listen and delight. She had learned that in words and in language, and there only, she could have whole and consummate being. She told me stories, and she taught me how to listen. I was a child and I listened. She could neither read nor write [...], but she taught me how to live among her words, how to listen and delight. 'Storytelling; to utter and to hear...' And the simple act of listening is crucial to the concept of language, more crucial even than reading and writing. (pp. 83-84)

Through his childhood experience with his grandmother, Tosamah has come to learn and realize how human life is controlled by the word. The word is a powerful remedy for mental and moral sufferings. When he evokes his grandmother's great talent as a storyteller, he remarks: "[...] Her words were medicine; they were magic and invisible." (p.85)

The word is essential in understanding human society. It instructs and informs a particular family, tribal or ethnic group descendants of things which have happened more or less before their birth. A striking argument in support of this is indubitably Tosamah's comprehension of his ancestors' stories. Thanks to Aho, he has known his history through the legend of Tai-me and the Kiowas. By way of illustration, it may be interesting to note what the priest reveals:

My grandmother used to tell me the story of Tai-me, of how Tai-me came to the Kiowas. The Kiowas were a sun dance culture, and Tai-me was their sun dance toll, their most sacred fetish; no medicine was ever more powerful. There is a story about the coming of Tai-me. This is what my grandmother told me. (p.85)

As this revelation points up the train of events connected with the people and the culture of the narrator's tribe, it also emphasizes the position of Momaday's narrative, which is situated the past. The evocation of tribal memories in the novel constitutes an important element which enables the writer to put into practice his *analeptic* technique of retrospection. By the same token, the narrative voice goes back in time to indicate that: "The story of the coming of Tai-me has existed for hundreds of years by word of mouth." (p.86) This indication proves that the legend is known and transmitted from generation to generation.

Momaday uses the character of the Priest of the Sun to carry out a duty of memory for his ancestors' experiences as storytellers and as people who have endured great sufferings since the coming of

European colonizers to America. Tosamah's sermon entitled "The Way to Rainy Mountain" is the most salient example of the Kiowa painful history. Proceeding from his grandmother's recollection, Tosamah's speech retells the Kiowa story of the origin of Devil's Tower in Wyoming - a place in connection with the US government's decision to prevent the Kiowas from carrying out the ceremony of sun dance culture, an important act of their faith :

That summer was known to my grandmother as Ä'poto EtÓdä-de K'ádÓ, Sun Dance When the Forked Poles Were Left Standing, and it is entered in the Kiowa calendars as the figure of a tree standing outside the unfinished framework of a medicine lodge. Before the dance could begin, a company of armed soldiers rode out from Fort Still orders to disperse the tribe. Forbidden without cause the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the tree (p.117).

This intervention of American soldiers marks a milestone in the Kiowa history. It stands out in folk memories as yet a sadly unforgettable experience that was passed orally from generation to generation. As the Priest of the Sun previously declares: "For

my people it is an old landmark.” (p.112) Through the voice of Tosamah, Momaday keeps the flame and immortalizes his folk memories.

From all this, it convincingly emerges that in *House Made of Dawn*, writing is a rewriting of what has been told, heard, seen or read. The novel actually demonstrates storytelling as the expression of Native American Culture. Through the Priest of the Sun’s sermons, Momaday retells us the stories and myths of origin of the Kiowa. Beyond the respects of his ancestors’ memory, the author’s retellings of past events within the fiction vividly show how the practice of retrospection may proceed from oral culture. Another case in point may be perceptible through the writer’s exploration of Francisco’s image.

1.3. Francisco, the Kiowa’s patriarch

Momaday presents Francisco, Abel’s grandfather as a venerable old man who is very concerned about his desire to perpetuate his Kiowa cultural heritage through his grandson. This presentation is interesting because it shows that from the character’s preoccupation with safeguarding his ancestral cultures, it follows the writer’s art of resorting to oral tradition to look back at previous events. The evocation of Francisco’s memory of the Kiowa history is a perfect illustration of it.

Besides, what strikes in observing the author’s narrative approach of retrospection is that it elucidates the text and yet sometimes marks the regression of its movement. This is simply due to the fact the narrator has to go back in the past to explain a present action. One need only take as example, Francisco’s recollection of the race he won when he was young. The narrator relates: “The old man Francisco drove a team of roan mares [...]. When he came to the place called Seytokwa, Francisco remembered the race for good hunting and harvests.” (pp.6-7) As deployed in the narrative voice quoted above, “remembered” suggests more than the intrusion of the omniscient narrator into the character’s thoughts or the mere fact of calling

back to mind the memory of the running. It expresses a state of nostalgia - nostalgia that the character wishes to overcome by teaching his grandson everything he knows of the history of his forbears and of the land around him.

It is clear that as the oldest man and the male head of his family, Francisco sees Abel as his heir whose mission is to keep the cultural memory alive by carrying on their family’s beliefs and customs. In this light, it is very significant that towards the end of the novel Abel returns to run the race for good hunting and harvests, as also described in the prologue: “Abel was running. He was alone and running, hard at first, heavily, but then easily and well” (p.1). The description of Abel’s final act in the prologue demonstrates that the narrative structure of *House Made of Dawn* is circular, and then the events and scenes happened earlier.

From this, we can see that Momaday’s narrative is essentially built on *analepsis*. These pervasive flashbacks highlight the inextricable connection between past and present, and underscore the recurrence and handing down of events and traditions through the generations. They contribute in restoring Native culture and identity.

II. RESTORING NATIVE IMAGE THROUGH ORAL TRADITIONS

One of the characteristics of *House Made of Dawn* is that it concurrently develops theories of deconstruction and reconstruction. Inspired by Native oral traditions, the text actually offers a deconstructive process of colonial speech-process by means of which, one may perceive the writer’s conscious or subconscious attempt of re-establishing some historical truths about Native Americans. If this comprehension can be justified through the Momaday’s reconsideration of historical judgments in the fiction, the author asserts that he never has and never will allow himself to become a spokesman for “the Indian,” preferring instead to be seen as a mainstream writer with a distinguishing ethnic heritage.¹ This assertion poses the problematic of giving systematically credence to

authors' commentaries on their own works. But, the deconstructive theory aims at showing that a text can transcend its limitations only by staying within them, for as Jacques Derrida writes: "Reading [...] cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it [...] There is nothing outside of the text."² This suggests that our comprehension of the novel must be drawn from the text rather than taking for granted only what the writer says. Accordingly, *House Made of Dawn*, beyond portraying the Native cultural history, may be read as a constructive subversion that proposes to restore Indian identity flouted by the intercession of external powers intent on destroying tribal traditions.

2.1. Sense and presence of dating

The first sign of constructive subversion is indisputably linked to Momaday's use of dates in the fiction. In his literary and artistic creation, the writer recurrently makes use of dates to relate, announce or describe his imaginative human adventure. As we know, dates are statements employed to indicate a specific period of time, day, month, year, one or all these, when something happened or is to happen. Their functions are manifold. They organize the narration in a chronological order and help the reader to follow the progression of the story. This remark fits in with *House Made of Dawn* in that Momaday substantially employs particular dates to subtitle each of the twelve chapters, which constitute the fiction. The book describes Abel's personal experience that lasts six years and eight months. It opens on July 20, 1945 and closes on February 28, 1952. Similarly, the four sections around which the narrative evolves, are successively dated. Announced by a title page, the different parts of *House Made of Dawn* are respectively:

- *The Longhair: Walatowa, Cañon de San Diego, 1945 (p.3)*

- *The Priest of the Sun: Los Angeles, 1952 (p.77)*
- *The Night Chanter: Los Angeles, 1952 (p.121)*
- *The Dawn Runner: Walatowa, 1952 (p.167)*

As we may see at the opening of each sequence, the author specifies the place and the date of the event that is going to be presented. These specifications back up the story. They attest the realistic approach of the author who certainly intends to stick to actuality, even if the literary work is above all, a reproduction and then, a fiction. The writer's concern with realness is evidenced by his objective to give credibility to his creative human adventure. Credibility is important only for a narrative which likes to bear witness to history.

A text may be "rooted" in reality when its temporal indications are precise and correspond with our calendar, or with testified historical facts. In *House Made of Dawn*, reality is reflected through the testimony of dates. The novel gives greater place to the past so as to tell something about the present in a roundabout way. It is in this sense that Momaday's reference to particular period of time, day, month, year appears as both a way to subvert White adventurers' judgments and an attempt to restore the true image of Native Americans. Thus, from his technique of re-establishing some historical facts, the author implicitly contradicts, even criticizes European explorers' contempt for Indians. Native Americans are denied their fundamental human rights. For instance, they are refused their right to worship, which is, as we know the first Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Kiowas' prevention from performing their sun dance culture is a perfect illustration, as the narrative voice makes us known the specific date, which: "[...] was July 20, 1890." (p.117)

The use of dates responds to the writer's object to note historic steps of the tribe past and underscore the events in the fiction. By the same token, it is an approach which absolutely disproves Western pre-conceived ideas, according to which Indians are

¹ Momaday, interview with Charles Woodard, in *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday*
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, p.39.

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1976, p.158.

“savage” to signify the opposite of U.S. civilization. It is in this context that we may regard Momaday’s indication of the last celebration of the Kiowa sun dance as not only a means to demolish the *frontier mythology*³ engendered by these thoughts, but also to show that Indians know their own history and culture. The Priest of the Sun reveals his grandmother personal experience: “My grandmother had a reverence for the sun [...] She was about seven years old when the last Kiowa sun dance was held in 1887.” (p. 116)

Dating is used to reinforce the discursive material, situate and confirm the orally transmitted history. It testifies the power of oral tradition and memory in narrative. Moreover, because of its accurate use of dates, *House Made of Dawn* may be considered as a historical work whose purpose is to re-establish past facts as they have actually happened. Following the example of dates, Momaday’s attempt to recover Native American image through the tribal memory is evidenced by significant actions.

2.2. Symbols: a means for constructive subversion

Momaday does not always offer clear textual facts to explain or reveal his intent of restoring the image of the Indian. His hidden ideas may be apprehended through the exploration of symbols that he uses. In the context of the novel, the analysis of symbols is the concern of deconstruction, which consists in proceeding “by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text.”⁴ The deconstructive reading leads us to go beyond the first layers of understanding literal images and better comprehend Momaday’s unavowed purpose. The description of traditional practices and some significant textual facts perfectly illustrate this observation.

2.2.1 Customs as the expression of cultural identity

In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday evokes certain

acts performed by characters as a sign of respect or worship. He also remarks that the social order is based upon these practices that have long been established and observed by the members of the community. These normative acts, which give rhythm to social life, are specific to tribes. By evoking them in his narrative, the author indubitably conveys a vision that expresses a cultural identity. Customs and habits do not only show up the existence and social organization of an ethnic group, but they also bespeak the characteristics of a tribe. At the beginning of the novel, we are given a picture of how Abel and his folks sit when they have to eat. The writer depicts: “They ate on the ground in groups, according to family and clan” (p.11). This image implicitly allows us to see that the Kiowa life is clan-oriented and communal.

By the same token, the careful reader may be struck by the writer’s recurrent allusion to traditions as a vector that directs and inspires the existence of Natives. Identification with nature as a source of goodness is integral to the Kiowas’ religious beliefs. Francisco firmly believes that a success at the tribal level foreshadows a good hunting and harvest. Similarly, Abel becomes a member of the Eagle Watchers Society when he has seen an eagle carrying a snake across the sky and told it to Patiestewa, the chief of the society. In this respect, when the protagonist is allowed to go with the society on an eagle hunt, he captures a magnificent bird. In a different connection, belonging to this particular society is very important in the sense that not only does it reveal the history of Abel’s tribe, but it also initiates him into the mysteries of life. For indeed, the Eagle Watchers Society is an ancient ritual organization of the Kiowas, who despite the great suffering they have experienced due to persecution and migration, still keeps the basic tenet of their culture, that is their identity. Its members are culturally different and individually identifiable: “They carried four things that should serve thereafter to signal who they were: a sacred flute; the bull and horse masks of Pecos; and the little wooden statue of their patroness María de Los Angeles, whom they called Porcingula. Now, after the intervening years and generations, the ancient blood of this forgotten tribe still ran in the veins of men” (p.15). Momaday

³ By frontier mythology, I mean the moral and physical barriers which have kept the White adventurer and the “savage” Indian separate.

⁴ Barbara Johnson. *The Critical Difference*, U.S.A.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, p.5.

recalls their origin and presents them as people of great virtues:

The Eagle Watchers Society was the principal ceremonial organization of the Bahkyush. Its chief, Patiestewa, and all its members were direct descendants of those old men and women who had made that journey along the edge of oblivion. There was a look about these men, even now. It was as if, conscious of having come so close to extinction, they had got a keener sense of humility than their benefactors, and paradoxically a greater sense of pride. Both attributes could be seen in such a man as old Patiestewa. He was hard, and he appeared to have seen more of life than had other men. In their uttermost peril long ago, the Bahkyush had been fashioned into seers and soothsayers. They had acquired a magic sense, which gave to them as a race so much dignity and bearing. They were medicine men; they were rainmakers and eagle hunters. (p.15)

Interestingly, the writer's presentation of the Eagle Watchers Society does not only attest that the pre-colonial Native world has proceeded from human values, but it also expresses an admiration for the people of this ancient tribe. However, behind the respect for these folks is hidden a reassertion of the value of Indian traditional society. We note this implicit intent of reassertion of the value in Momaday's evocation of the Kiowa as "a living sun dance culture." (p.117)

As a fundamental expression of a tribal cultural identity, traditions have to be known and perpetuated through future generations. In this regard, the narrative voice notifies the reader about Francisco's preoccupation with the survival of ancestral practices: "These things [Francisco] told to his grandsons carefully, slowly and at length, because they were old and true, and they could be lost forever as easily as one generation is lost to the next, as easily as one old man might lose his voice, having spoken not enough or not at all." (p.173) The act of Abel's running in the prologue and at the end of the novel comes within this context. For, by this action, the protagonist fulfils his grandfather's desire of carrying on an ancestral practice. In other respects,

the continuation of this custom after the death of Francisco reveals Abel's acceptance of his position as the new torchbearer of his grandparents' traditions. The recognition of his new status as the keeper of the flame suggests the failure of his total deracination. For, despite his experience as an Indian who has fought under the U.S. flag during the World War II, Abel comes back home to keep his family traditions alive. This return to his native heritage means a rebuttal to Western civilization. The Native's rejection of European invasion is subtly dealt in the text.

2.2.2. Abel's killing of the albino

Abel's murder of Juan Reyes, the albino, is a dynamic narrative principle because it impressively participates in the construction of the story. The writer evokes it as the motif for which the protagonist is sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and later placed under the care of an Indian Relocation program in Los Angeles. Beyond its consequences, the act of killing is an expression of the "savage" Indian's resistance to the White adventurer's invasion.

For remembering, let us say that it occurs just after the performance of the ritual of the feast of Santiago when Reyes ceremonially smears Abel with the blood of a rooster. The protagonist ripostes by stabbing the albino. Here, the villagers are taken in Momaday's trap of subversion for they perceive Abel's act as both his disassociation from the tribal customs and the effect of a drug that causes him hallucination. The significance of the protagonist's action goes beyond this perception.

In reality, Abel's killing of Reyes may be construed as the Native's retribution for their humiliation by the White man who has treated them with contempt and destroyed the wealth of their culture. The portrayal of Reyes is relevant to the White adventurer who has brutalized the Indian. Momaday writes: "The white man was large and thickset, powerful and deliberate in his movements [...] Again and again the white man struck [Abel], heavily, brutally, upon the chest and shoulders and head, and Abel threw up his hands." (pp.38-39) Here

the term “white man” refers to Reyes as to identify him with the Western invader. Besides, because of his unnatural whiteness and insatiable cruelty, the albino embodies the white culture, characterized by its brutality and scornfulness towards Indian people. It is in this sense that Abel sees him as an evil and fatally reacts to his attack. Abel’s reaction is justified in connection with the historical relationship of conflict between Whites and Indians. For, there is not the slightest compunction when a White man kills a Native. In the trial following the murder of the albino, the narrator reveals Abel’s state of mind:

[Abel] had killed the white man. It was not a complicated thing, after all; it was very simple. It was the most natural thing in the world. Surely they could see that, these men who meant to dispose of him in words. They must know that he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance, that there could be no hesitation whatsoever. For he would know what the white man was, and he would kill him if he could. A man kills such an enemy if he can. (pp. 90-91)

CONCLUSION

At the end of our analysis, it follows that Momaday resorts to elements of traditional history to expose the realities of his society. His recourse to tribal traditions is motivated as oral culture serves him as a viaticum to reconsider Western historical judgments about the “savage” Indian. The reconsideration is evidenced by the writer’s approach to literary aesthetic. Certainly Momaday pretends not to be the defender of the Indians, but he acknowledges the fact that as long as the Natives do not tell their own history, the historical accounts about them will always be in favour of the colonists. That is why he writes: “[I]t is imperative that the Indian define himself...that he refuses to let others define him.”¹ Even if Momaday writes about his native oral culture in English, the language of the oppressor, his narrative is deeply rooted into the Indian aesthetics. In so doing, he takes part in the

deconstructive process of the colonial discourse on his culture and contributes to restore the historical truth about the image of Indians and their traditional institutions. Therefore, his artistry lies within the tradition of constructive subversion.

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