
UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall consider different perspectives, interpretations and viewpoints on Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. The novel has several layers of meaning; the characters have different facets; the incidents have multiple significance. It will be useful to look at the novel from different perspectives.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

We can discuss the theme, the technique, the characters and other aspects from various points of view. Such critical considerations enrich our understanding and provide a comprehensive view of this great novel.

4.2 BILDUNGSROMAN

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* may be described as a *Bildungsroman*. This is a subgenre of the novel. It is also called the "apprenticeship novel," the "pedagogical novel," the "formative novel," or "novel of character development." These terms are descriptive and indicate the nature of the theme in these novels. Generally the protagonist of these novels is a young man who matures and learns the ways of the world. This learning experience is often, but not necessarily, accomplished with the help of a teacher or a series of mentors. Samuel Butler's *The way of All Flesh* (1903) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are fine examples of the Bildungsroman in English. If we examine the life of Abel in the light of this definition we find enough justification to call *House Made of Dawn* an apprenticeship novel. Abel, almost an orphan, matures through his travels, his exposure to the white man's world and his participation in World War II. He also learns through his encounters with the albino and the policeman Martinez. His involvement with Angela and other women also shapes his growth. His observation of and participation in many ritual activities of his community contribute to the development of his personality. There is, finally, the direct teaching of his grandfather, Francisco. As he lay dying, the old man recalls from memory the significant events in the history of his community. These memories are uttered at dawn for six days in succession. The traditional wisdom of the tribe is passed on by the old medicine man to the novice who duly assumes his mantle. Whatever doubts and dissatisfaction troubled Abel at

the beginning are cleared and he is re-born, as it were. The tribal rituals, traditional practices, games, ceremonies, and chanting and singing contribute to the maturation of Abel and his integration into his tribal community. He literally goes through several initiation ceremonies of his community and thus graduates from a state of ignorance to a state of wisdom, from innocence to experience.

5.3 THE BIBLICAL MYTH

The central figure of *House Made of Dawn* is named Abel. The biblical association of such a name is too obvious to ignore. In the biblical story Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve. He was a shepherd. Cain was his elder brother and he was "a tiller of the ground." When the Lord favoured the offering of Abel, Cain was envious and angry. He "rose up against his brother Abel and slew him." The Lord then cursed Cain, saying: "when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." This story has been used by writers to illustrate sibling rivalry and its evil consequences.

In *House Made of Dawn*, the protagonist is named Abel. He does not have an elder brother. In fact, there is no character specifically named Cain in this novel. But there are three characters who have an inimical attitude towards Abel. One of them is John Tosamah, the Kiowa "Priest of the Sun" who drives Abel to drink. Eventually Abel returns from the war as a drunk. The second rival to Abel is the Tanoan albino named Juan Reyes Fragua. The albino is successful at the game of the Chicken Pull and Abel fails. The albino pursues Abel, pins him to a wall and flails him with the rooster, thus injuring and humiliating Abel. The albino is an Indian, but because of the whiteness of his appearance he may be said to represent the evil forces of the white race. Abel kills the albino who in Abel's mind stands for a witch. By this murder Abel frees himself from all those forces which he has internalized. These forces stripped him of his pride, weakened his resolution, and blocked his re-entry into his community. Abel is the murderer, not the victim, as in the biblical story. Abel goes to jail as a punishment for his crime.

5.4 MOMADAY AND MELVILLE

There is another aspect of the albino which needs comment. The most striking feature of his appearance is his "white immensity." The other immense white creature in literature which comes to our mind is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the white whale. Momaday refers to the similarity between the white whale and the albino: "He is a white man, or rather a 'white man' in quotes, in appearance, but in fact he is neither white nor a man in the usual sense of those words. He is an embodiment of evil like Moby Dick, an intelligent malignity." If the albino is evil or a witch as Abel thinks of him, he needed to be killed.

The episode involving Abel and the albino is actually closer to Melville's *Billy Budd*. Billy and Abel share several qualities even as Claggart and the albino have some common features. Claggart, like the albino, is referred to as a "snake" and had a "pallid" complexion as a sign of his depraved character. He harasses and torments the innocent Billy and bears false tales against him to Captain Vere. Billy, kills Claggart unintentionally in a fit of emotion; Abel kills the albino, his tormentor. Billy is inarticulate; he fails to explain his position, he could not defend himself at his trial. Although every one knows that Billy is as innocent as a lamb, he is hanged. Abel kills what he thought was a witch. He too is inarticulate. The judges dispose of him "in language, their language, and they were making a bad job of it. They were strangely uneasy, full of hesitation, reluctance." Abel is sent to jail.

The third character in *House Made of Dawn* who resembles Cain is the sadistic cop, Martinez. His severe beating of Abel is like Cain killing Abel. Despite the three tormentors who make his life difficult and unhappy, Abel enters the race and survives and achieves integration into his tribal culture.

5.5 MOMADAY AND FAULKNER

Momaday had great respect for Faulkner. He wanted to write like him. He borrowed some of the technical features from Faulkner for writing his novel: the fragmentation of chronology and scattering the time-segments like in a jigsaw puzzle, multiple points of view, stream of consciousness technique, a jumbled up series of flashbacks and flash forwards of Abel and Francisco, symbolic patterns of meaning and the use of different styles to suit different characters. Their thematic concerns are also similar. While Faulkner writes about the disintegration of the Southern society, Momaday writes about Indian cultures in the Southwest which are under great pressure in modern times. Racial prejudice and miscegenation also figure in the writings of both. Both these writers recognize the importance of tradition for a happy life. Both put a premium on the past, on history for the successful functioning of a community. Faulkner says: "no man is himself, he's the sum of his past, and in a way... of his future too." In a similar vein, Momaday says: "notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present." Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* and Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* suffer untold misery because they lost grip over their pasts. Both are pursued and attacked; both are rather inarticulate; both are addicted to drink; both travel from place to place; both do not have cordial relations with the white people. Their ends are, however, different. Joe Christmas is killed while Abel succeeds his grandfather as the medicine man of his community.

Both Faulkner and Momaday are critical of urbanization. Faulkner's writings are "a criticism of the prevailing commercial and urban culture, a criticism made from the standpoint of a provincial and traditional culture." The Americans pillaged and plundered the land and desecrated the wilderness for material gains. Faulkner asserts that only the wilderness could feed and nourish man, but the Anglo-Saxon colonizers made the wilderness vanish rapidly. In his novel, Momaday also depicts the city in similar terms. Both the novelists believed in what may be termed "geographical determinism". According to this both individuals and cultures are shaped by the physical environment. It is therefore necessary for individuals and societies to maintain harmony with the land. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner writes: "That's the trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image. In Momaday's novel, Francisco's pursuit of the bear and later his initiation as a hunter may have been based on Faulkner's story, "The Bear." Like Faulkner in some of his novels, Momaday also gives dates as chapter headings to narrate the events on particular days.

5.6 MOMADAY'S PESSIMISM

While a good number of critics and commentators on Momaday's novel, *House Made of Dawn* including Marian Willard Hylton, Martha Scott Trimble, Carole Oleson, Harold S. McAllister, Mathias Schubnell, and Lawrence J. Evers have given a positive interpretation of the novel and explain the ending as spiritual renewal and cultural rejuvenation for not only Abel, but his tribe as a whole, there is an opposite view presented by Charles R. Larson in his essay, "Rejection: The Reluctant Return." The structure of the novel is important for unravelling the meaning. The structure is circular and a circle encloses a square. The Indian culture...

in a helpless way by the Anglo-American society. A circular journey which Abel undertakes is a journey to nowhere. Returning to the point of departure is not a significant progress.

Larson observes obscurity as a major problem in understanding the meaning of the novel. Obscurity leads to ambiguity on factual matters within the narrative. For instance, there is ambiguity in the age, parentage and racial origin of the albino. Does he belong to Francisco's generation or Abel's? Is he Indian or white? Why is he called the "white man" if he is Indian? What are his motives in attacking Abel? There are many questions like these which are not answered either in the novel or in the several interviews given by Momaday.

Francisco tells his grandsons pointing the dawn runners that they are "dead runners." After his grandfather's funeral, Abel runs the ceremonial race. Larson interprets this race as a race towards death. According to this view Abel is an unaccommodated man at the end and so he seeks death. The ceremonial race is a suicide run.

House Made of Dawn cannot be properly understood without reference to Momaday's two other later works, namely, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976). The first of these has a three-part structure and the parts are interwoven. The three parts are:

- 1) the Kiowa legend
- 2) the historical facts about that legend
- 3) Momaday's own experience with those events or facts.

This book records the historic movements of the Kiowa people from the North to the Southern Plains. Tosamah's sermon in the novel also narrates the migration of the Kiowa people. The second book, *The Names*, is an autobiographical narrative which also deals with the same material essentially.

Larson is quite clear in his mind that the overall picture of American Indians which emerges from a study of *House Made of Dawn* is one of pessimism. It is eloquent, but depressing. There is a deep sense of futility and nihilism informing the lives of the individuals as of the Indian tribes. The future has nothing to offer; the past can be recaptured in fleeting moments only. A people who are denied a future are all but doomed. The Indians are a vanishing breed and not a rejuvenated breed. Larson thinks that almost all Indian characters in Momaday's novel are headed for "spiritual suicide." Abel is a primary example for this unfortunate, but inescapable, conclusion. Abel is associated in the novel with trapped creatures consistently. On the reservation, he is associated with caged eagles. He hunts eagles and kills one of them. Outside the reservation, he is likened to fish out of water. The grunion are laid out on the beach in a helpless way. Abel lies on the beach ruminating about his past. He is physically wounded by Martinez and feels a spiritual void in his life. There is no security for him. He becomes a zombie, a dull, stupid, unattractive person. He is wounded by Martinez's severe beating; he is widowed in spirit after a series of unhappy experiences during his wanderings. So he is practically dead in body and mind. Of course, Abel returns home completing a circular journey. But Larson says Abel returns to die; he has no choice. His physical health fails him and so he cannot survive on the reservation.

Let us now look at some of the other Indians and see how they fare. Ben Benally and Tosamah are urban Indians, that is, Indians relocated in cities. They are cut off from their roots; they are also like fish out of water or ensnared eagles. They find city life terrible; they live in small tenements in slums. In the impersonal urban environment nobody cares for them. There is no sense of belonging; there is no spirit of place. The city life is stifling. Benally lives in the midst of a spiritual vacuum. The city has no interest in helping the ethnic minorities; they are left to fend for themselves or perish. Tosamah is a fascinating character. He is the traditional trickster, his life is a sham.

second sermon in the novel is much like *The Way to Rainy Mountain* dealing with the culture and history of the Kiowas. Both Benally and Tosamah do not fare any better than Abel or other Indians. They are also on the verge of spiritual suicide. Tosamah's oral recital of Kiowa history depicts the cultural disharmony of the tribe. Fray Nicolas's journal is written history on the same subject. It points to the cultural disillusionment and collapse of the Kiowas.

Momaday attempts to balance several sets of opposites: oral history and written history, tribal religion and Christianity, reservation and city, Indians and whites. The older, the primitive cultures, traditions and ways of life are squeezed out by the encroachment and onslaught of the Americans. It is an unequal battle and the result is predictable.

Attitudes to language among the Indians and among Americans are diametrically opposite. Tosamah attacks the white man for diluting and proliferating the word which is sacred to the Indians. Word is as sacred as breath for the natives. Ironically, Tosamah also dilutes words. Abel does not simply understand the language of the judges at his trial: "Word by word these men were disposing of him in language, *their* language, and they were making a bad job of it". Abel is confused and helpless.

Another important dimension of *House Made of Dawn* is the racial problem. Larson demonstrates how one ethnic group slowly, but surely, strangles another through "the subtle and insidious ways." Not only do these antagonistic people speak different languages, but even when they use the same language, they do fail to communicate or understand. Abel's trial is an illustration of this. They strangle by deeds that is, historical patterns. They stifle the culture of the minority groups by imposing their own culture. After listing a number of depressing aspects of the novel, Larson declares: "Taken together, along with the over-riding images of death and destruction, these issues make Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the most searching indictment of the white world by a Native American novelist."

In Larson's view the recurring images of death, pain and sickness reinforce the meaning of the novel that there is no hope for the Indians and their culture. Abel returns home, not to rejuvenate himself, but to die; he prepares to die when he covers his body with pollen and ashes which are symbols of life and death. His ceremonial run at the end is a ritual suicide. His grandfather refers to the participants as "dead runners" and calls it a "race of the dead". The goal of the race itself is death. Tosamah's church is juxtaposed with death because "everyone thought of death." The American Indians have a short life-span. Abel's mother, his elder brother Vidal, and Abel himself die prematurely. The idea of death is underscored in other ways also: mass slaughter in World War II, death of the eagle and killing of the rooster in the game of Chicken Pull on the reservation, the death-room of Abel's mother and brother, Francisco's death.

The circular structure of the novel is capable of different interpretations. One way of looking at the end of the novel is that it is an illustration of "self-realization." Therefore there is a return to life - giving forces within traditional cultures. The second view of the closing of the novel is that it is an example of defeat, of destruction and of spiritual suicide. Francisco passing is the passing of an older way of life. The younger generation of Indians comprising Able, Ben Benally, Tosamah, have no satisfactory means of coming to grips with the world of the white man. They are being erased or obliterated, slowly but surely and steadily. Their world is a cul-de-sac. The conclusion is ambiguous. What's Abel's fate? Does he return to his roots? Or does he withdraw into the hollow log? In the latter event, it is symbolic of the murder of Abel's past.

Whatever interpretation one may make, "*House Made of Dawn* is the most radically experimental, the most obscure piece of fiction written by a Native American, an intellectual puzzle" (Larson).

5.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we considered Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* as a Bildungsroman or apprenticeship novel. We discussed the biblical myth. Then we examined the literary kinship of Momaday with Herman Melville and William Faulkner. In theme, images, symbols, and techniques he has much in common with the great American novelists. Then we discussed the novel as an expression of pessimism about the Indian culture. Such a view is supported by the imagery, incidents, character analysis and overall impact. This pessimistic view is contrary to the view discussed in Unit 4. Finally, Momaday's novel is an "intellectual puzzle."

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Consider *House Made of Dawn* an apprenticeship novel/Bildungsroman.
2. Discuss Momaday's indebtedness to Melville and Faulkner.
3. Justify the view that the novel presents a pessimistic view of Indian culture.
4. Charles Larson calls the novel "an intellectual puzzle." What puzzling qualities can you find in this novel?
5. There are two opposite interpretations – affirmative and pessimistic – of *House Made of Dawn*. Which interpretation do you prefer. Defend your preference with evidence from the text.

5.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Evers, Lawrence J. "Words and Places: A Reading of *House Made of Dawn*." In Andrew Wiget. Ed. *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*. Boston: G.K. Hall 1985. 211-230.
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