

Search for Identity in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon
Silko's *Ceremony*

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Abstract

From a young age, Momaday was deeply immersed in the Kiowa culture of his paternal lineage. Momaday's writing possesses a poetic quality mostly due to his background as a poet and storyteller. *House Made of Dawn* achieved immediate acclaim, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, a year post-publication, which facilitated the emergence of numerous Native authors, nearly all of whom attribute their success to Momaday, including James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie. Silko, akin to Louise Erdrich, explores the issue of hybrid identity in her writings, particularly focussing on the sensation of being “neither white nor entirely traditional Indian.” In 1977, Silko published her inaugural novel, *Ceremony*; it serves as a reaction from the Laguna people to N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *House Made of Dawn*. This study seeks to analyse the theme of identity through the interconnected elements of identification, home, ritual, and narrative in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Abel and Tayo's return home channels the solitary energies of individuals into the collective, enabling characters to return to their respective homes. Abel and Tayo's wartime traumas have estranged them to such an extent that they are incapable of recognising their environment or possessing a coherent sense of self. The author analyses several features that establish a sense of “home” for the characters, as well as the methods by which they have been “unhomed.” The paper through the selected works examines how the indigenous consciousness compelled the Natives to restore their identity.

Keywords: Identity, Myth, Native literature, Oral traditions, Place.

Introduction

Native American cultures demonstrate considerable diversity and intricacy. For instance, over five hundred different Native American languages exist, each as different from English as English is from Arabic, and as Arabic is from Swahili. Each one owns unique myths, histories,

and narratives. N. Scott Momaday states, “The voices, comprising three distinct tones, can be perceived all around us.” The work examines the interaction among mythic, historical, and personal aspects, which subsequently form a rotating and alternating wheel. “The transition from myth to history to memoir and then back to myth is a cyclical phenomenon.” Native American literature is profoundly connected to the understanding of Native American identity. Three significant views arise in this contentious discourse: those focused on legal lineages, the cultural traditions, and bicultural production, which involves the creation of works that amalgamate two distinct cultures. Literary critic, Kenneth Lincoln, defines “Indian” as an individual with a minimum of a quarter Native American ancestry and tribal affiliation. Consequently, Native American literature denotes works authored by individuals legally acknowledged as Native American, irrespective of the subject or form of their writing. Another perspective that links Native American identity to literature is the emphasis on the preservation of cultural practices. Literary academics who subscribe to this viewpoint focus on aspects of "traditional" Indian culture present in contemporary American Indian literature, such as the preservation of oral traditions. Another perspective in Native American studies analyses American Indian identity and literature by emphasising elements outside lineage or cultural preservation. This group should be perceived as a fusion of Native American and European American cultures together with its distinct customs. Some Native Americans assert that their historical integration of diverse cultural aspects, particularly from different Native American tribes, signifies that being Native American encompasses both bicultural and multicultural identities. A considerable proportion of American Indians primarily identify as members of certain tribes rather than as “Native Americans.” When engaging with the authors in this course, it is essential to recognise that our understanding of the Navajo and their religious practices is probably not relevant to the Chippewa. The Chippewa constitute a unique group, geographically, linguistically, and culturally apart from the Navajo. Certain historians have suggested that Native American tribes within a certain geographic region demonstrate increased cultural homogeneity owing to common language, familial ties, and the impact of their surrounding landscapes on their civilizations. The discipline of Native American studies includes several important geographic regions: the Southwest, Plains, California, Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, South, and Southwest. The work offers a cohesive amalgamation of specifics related to each author's respective tribe, alongside overarching traits prevalent among Native American societies.

Identity

In current times of turmoil, individuals recognise the necessity to define themselves and reflect upon it to seek answers to fundamental concerns like their roots, origins, history, and memories. The quest for identity is infused with a desire to discover a sense of belonging, a community to align with, and subsequently a cause to fight for. During self-reflection, individuals select to integrate into a culture that revitalises their identity, namely by embracing the national and cultural identity of their ancestors. The process of assimilation is repeatedly confronted by aspects of one's identity, such as nationality, religion, sect, race, ethnicity, gender, or personal sense of superiority. Collectively, these manifestations constitute the driving force of the quest for identity. Such circumstances compel individuals to safeguard and advocate for their true identities. Individuals examine historical patterns to identify techniques for the development and reconstruction of identities. The challenges encountered by indigenous populations worldwide have been largely consistent. The contemporary challenges faced by tribal populations in the U.S., formally referred to as “Native Americans,” are more comprehensively understood within the context of colonization. Following the establishment of colonies in regions sacred to indigenous populations globally, these communities endured profound life-altering experiences as colonization encroached upon their territories, expropriated their lands, devastated their habitats, and severely disrupted their cultural and traditional practices. The indigenous people were displaced from their territories, stripped of their cultural identity, compelled to abandon their language, and denied justice. The notable characteristics of Momaday's works are the diverse portrayal of persons, landscapes, and indigenous narratives. He is meticulous in addressing the identity issue of Native Americans and emphasises the necessity of cultivating a current identity adept at navigating settler policies. He advocates for the cultivation of a modern identity that is robust and spiritually significant. Despite the myriad tensions and transformations between previous and present generations, he endeavours to bridge the gap between ancestors and modern Native Americans. Momaday's writings assert a significant and modern indigenous identity that is multi-tribal, primarily influenced by Kiowa, Navajo, and Jemez Pueblo traditions, while also including multicultural elements from both native and European sources. Thus, his work embodies the diverse and frequently compounded hybrid identities of Native Americans in the post-World War II period. Silko exhibits a heightened awareness of the hybridity that transpires during the colonial encounter. Her viewpoint is inherently hybrid, arises from the European-Native interaction, as well as the

mixed-blood encounters. Silko reveals the specific parallels between the two dissimilar cultures.

Myth

Myths are ancient narratives that elucidate the origins of events or cultural practices. They are essential storylines within a society's storytelling heritage. For instance, Herman Melville opens his work *Moby Dick* with the phrase "Call me Ishmael," referencing the Bible. In Native American literatures, the principal characters often reference traditional oral narratives, such as coyote tales, cultural hero legends, migration myths, and creation stories. Each of these narratives encompasses a standard array of characters, events, and elements. Creation myths, akin to other Native American oral narratives like cultural hero and trickster tales, have etiological characteristics. These features elucidate the roots of recognisable characteristics in the world. The tribe's distinct topography and environment often influence these narratives. The ceremonies linked to these creation narratives often represent a ceremonial voyage to a cohesive condition of origin and centre, where healing and rejuvenation might be attained. Creation myths, akin to the biblical account in Genesis, recount the genesis of the universe and the advent of humankind. The earth-diver myth was widespread among the tribes in contemporary Canada and the eastern United States. These narratives depict the Earth's formation by entities that gathered sediment from beneath the waves generated by a cataclysmic deluge. Emergence myths were widespread in the Southwest and other areas. These narratives often illustrate the genesis of humanity as arising from the womb of Mother Earth and being called to the surface by Father Sun. Despite the numerous variances in the histories of different tribes, they frequently delineate the process of world creation and illustrate the nature of a nation within this context. The historical veneration of Native Americans for the earth is a crucial element of the perspective of many contemporary writers and conservationists. Tricksters are individuals capable of navigating between the domain of the living and that of the deceased. The insubordinate nature of the trickster often serves as a catalyst for innovation or development. In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, the cultural hero of the tribes faces the gambler. The stakes are considerable: the hero commits to serving the community, even at the expense of his own life. These crucial sessions clearly demonstrate the public's view of the transformation of the original environment into its current condition. N. Scott Momaday has demonstrated via his magnum opus, *House Made of Dawn*, that identity is irrevocably intertwined with narrative. As a Kiowa Native, he utilises the striking landscapes of Arizona, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Oklahoma—his ancestral origins—to effectively convey the

narratives imparted by his Kiowa forebears during his childhood. Momaday's great-grandfather, Pohdlohk (translated as "Old Wolf" in Kiowa), bestowed upon him his initial Indian name: Tsoai-talee, meaning "Rock-Tree Boy." In his memoir *The Names* (1976), Momaday recounts how Pohd-lohk transmitted the legacy of a Kiowa storyteller to him by narrating the origin of his Indian name. *House Made of Dawn* narrates the story of a young Kiowa, Abel, who is ensnared between two realms—his indigenous history on the reservation and the modernised landscape of contemporary America in Los Angeles. In composing the story, Momaday utilised his own distressing childhood recollections of residing in Jemez Pueblo during the tumultuous period of World War II. "The Night Chant," referred to as void, is an extensive healing ritual practiced by the Navajo people. It encompasses several rites, including dances, the making of sand paintings, and the use of prayer sticks. This nine-day event is a customary practice. "The Night Chant," while unique to the Navajo people, exemplifies the profound interrelation among language, healing, and spirituality in indigenous traditions. This is regarded as a notable practice in the domain of oral tradition. "The Night Chant" is a ritualistic chant executed by the Navajo people, who migrated from northern regions to the Southwest approximately seven hundred to one thousand years ago. It functions as a mechanism that not only interrupts the typical course of an illness but also directs the individual towards reinstating the intrinsic balance and wellness essential for good health.

Oral Traditions

Oral traditions vary according to geographic region and tribal affiliations. Academics have conventionally examined the influence of the American Indian oral tradition on contemporary American Indian written literature in two dimensions: the substance and the manner of expression. Academicians often concentrate on the narratives and songs of American Indian communities when analysing the influence of the American Indian oral tradition on contemporary literature. These narratives often focus on specific characters and include traditional events and elements. Prevalent narrative archetypes include gambler, trickster, creation, abduction, and migration myths. Modern authors possess the capacity to integrate these story tropes into their literary compositions. Leslie Marmon Silko's work *Ceremony* reinterprets the Yellow Woman stories, integral to the "Pueblo Abduction Cycle." The oral style is characterised by empathy, active engagement, adaptation to various contexts, and dependence on repetition. Repetition is essential in the oral tradition, fulfilling ceremonial functions and aiding in memorisation and story consistency. The repetition of words confers a distinct type of effect. Greg Sarris, an essayist and critic, underscores the intimate relationship

between oral tradition and the land. In this setting, the landscape functions as a sacred text, with each element—stones, mountains, trees, rivers, or specific segments of a river—symbolizing a tale and functioning as a method of preserving and recalling stories linked to that specific location. Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the residence of her father's birth. She was reared in Old Laguna, a settlement founded centuries ago by the Pueblo people. Her family possesses a broad heritage, with relatives of Plains Indian, Mexican, and European descent. On her paternal side, she possesses ancestors of both Laguna and Caucasian descent, whilst her maternal lineage includes ancestry from the Plains tribes. The Laguna aspect of her heritage is distinguished by its cosmopolitan character, shaped by the influences of Hopi, Jemez, Zuni, Navajo, and Spanish cultures, which have significantly affected its cultural practices and oral traditions. In *Ceremony*, Silko integrates aspects of mythology, history, and personal recollection, akin to Momaday's work. She places greater emphasis on the importance of the feminine landscape, in contrast to Momaday's predominantly male-centric narrative. *Ceremony* by Silko recounts the story of Tayo, a person of mixed Indigenous ancestry, who fights in World War II and returns to Laguna physically unscathed but profoundly afflicted by post-traumatic stress disorder. Critic Greg Sarris asserts that the story centres on a man who is forcibly displaced from his home during World War II, severing his connection to his familiar environment and memories. The tale centres on his quest to return home and re-establish his identity, personal narratives, and insights gained from his surroundings. While he acclimates to the landscape and stories, recognising that his participation in World War II was more about tactile sensation than visual observation, as his fingers need the roughness of clay. This connection remained intact. It is from this unique perspective that we may observe all locales. The reconnection begins with the arrival of “Thought Woman,” a legendary and holy being, alongside “The Spider,” as they collaboratively weave a tale. The characters discover consolation and rejuvenation via the potency of language. The narrative intricately intertwines tales from the Pueblo oral tradition with contemporary interpretations of old healing rituals. Silko has authored numerous additional works, including *Storyteller* (1981), a collection of narratives and poetry; *Almanack of the Dead* (1991), a compelling and apocalyptic epic that explores the power struggles among marginalised and underground figures in North America; and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), a novel set in the early 20th century that investigates the “Ghost Dance movement” and the cultural dislocation faced by a young Laguna girl adopted by an affluent white couple. Silko's paintings often incorporate grim and disquieting themes, yet they consistently examine the possibilities for renewal and resurgence, particularly within American Indian traditions, values, and ways of

life. This optimism is partially contingent upon fostering a loving and respectful relationship with the natural environment of the Southwest.

Place

The term “place” in the Western context transcends the mere definition of “setting”; it is intricately linked to the lives, values, culture, and narratives of a community. The Laguna community adheres to a “matrifocal” structure, wherein women occupy a pivotal position. This viewpoint significantly impacts Silko's writing, which often revisits narratives focused on female characters like “Yellow Woman” and “Thought/Spider Woman.” Silko has articulated that storytelling functions as a method for interacting with one's environment and understanding oneself, others, and existence in its entirety. It includes both the natural and geographical elements as well as the historical and experiential facets of an individual's life. “It encompasses a complete way of life.” In her book *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen, an author and critic who is a cousin of Silko, posits a bold assertion regarding the status of women in American Indian communities. She asserts that “In traditional American Indian tribal societies, the dominant governance structure is predominantly gynocentric, indicating it is primarily led by women, and it is never patriarchal.” The Yellow Woman stories, as recounted by the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest, vividly illustrate the relationships between humans and spirits in the post-creation realm. The Yellow Woman narratives generally portray a young married woman who leaves her village to engage in a sexual liaison with a spirit-man. Although she may occasionally encounter a horrible demise, she more frequently reunites with her family and tribe, having experienced spiritual development. Consequently, she has a beneficial and impactful influence on the entire community. In her seminal essay “Kochinnenako in Academe,” Paula Gunn Allen emphasises that Yellow Woman narratives focus on female protagonists and are consistently told from the viewpoint of the Yellow Woman. These narratives generally underscore her feeling of alienation from her group; nonetheless, her ostensibly defiant actions frequently result in beneficial consequences for both the Yellow Woman and her people. Allen posits that women's behaviour, especially in particular contexts or moments, must diverge from conventional standards for the collective benefit of society. Like numerous Native American stories, these narratives aim to delineate important societal limits and identify instances of their transgression. Allen emphasises the crucial function women serve in sustaining the structured structure of the community. Leslie Marmon Silko frequently integrates parts of the Yellow Woman tradition in her literature, especially when

depicting women who are strong, particularly regarding their sexuality, and who in turn empower others, exemplified by the spirit-being “Ts'eh.”

Conclusion

House Made of Dawn and *Ceremony* underscore the relationship between identity development and narrative: our ties to places, individuals, and tales shape our essence and trajectory. Humans developed from organisms with ambiguous forms, often exhibiting characteristics of both animals and humans. Each tribe formulated its own comprehension of the essential relationships between individuals and the natural environment, along with the origins of important tribal traditions and social structures. Trickster tales, a form of creation narrative, display variances influenced by their individual societies, yet retain certain core qualities. Tricksters are not simply deceivers or jesters who entertain us with their coarse humour. By contravening traditional norms, they both breach and underscore the importance of regulations in a post-creation context. They also have the capacity for independent creation. Navajo storyteller “Yellowman” claims a duty to narrate the tales of the trickster Coyote, believing that such exposure will cultivate virtue in his descendants. Conversely, if they are deprived of these tales, they may become ethically compromised. Narratives have the capacity to render anything feasible. Healing songs and chants are of considerable significance in the oral traditions of Native American civilizations. Generally, songs and chants seek to emulate a specific state rather than a distinct event. Songs and chants are rarely repeated to assist the preservation of Native American customs, beliefs, and languages.

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