



Homelessness and Alienation of Native Americans in Momaday's House Made of Dawn: Tajfel's Social Identity Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at identifying the aspects of alienation in the life of Native Americans. It investigates how Abel, the protagonist of House Made of Dawn, faces trouble in exploring his identity which is split between native and mainstream American ideologies and traditions. His physical remoteness from his ethnicity, ancestral land, and his alienation from culture and traditions alienate him in both cultures. He becomes a misfit when he is void of his past and unable to accept the new one. Exploring different dimensions of Abel's character and life events, the paper depicts life on Indian reservations and the status of being homeless within the home. Tajfel's theoretical approach of social identity highlights the need to define identity in this fragmented, torn, and chaotic world and urge to belong to a social group that shapes present in accordance to past behaviors, attitudes and norms. The character of Abel in Momaday's narrative depicts this lack of social identity in his own land and becomes psychologically exiled, alienated and depressed native in his own land.

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1. Introduction

House Made of Dawn depicts disturbed life of Native Americans before and after intrusion of West in their native land. Consequently, they suffer from alienation and identity crisis. It becomes difficult to maintain social identity through native traditions, cultural associations and belongingness. Natives have a rich culture and traditions of storytelling, tribal myths and local rituals. Natives do claim to have a voice through native literary discourses. Literature of Native American's is a literature of resistance. They try to recall their past identity and status in a newly corrupt and altered culture. This shift from traditional roots to modern imposed cultural patterns disturbs their individuality and indigenosity. Resultantly, Abel becomes a misfit on his own land.

Character of Abel represents all native Indians who suffer from identity crisis, alienation and eventually encounter unknown fears. He is trapped between his past values and new dimensions of white culture. Abel is physically and spiritually detached from his heritage. Abel's character represents a psychologically torn and hurt native and he can be visualized in light of his relations to different characters such as his grandfather Francisco, a white woman Angela and Ben his Native American friend. Momaday's description of land, character of Abel and a continuous running reflect the comparison of traditional American culture and modern USA. In different turns of the narrative, Momaday depicts the importance and richness of Native ethnicity and urges the need to ensure survival of the indigenous culture.

2. Literature Review

Momaday very artistically illustrates multi-dimensional life of Native Americans in *House Made of Dawn*. He gives a detailed description of Natives caught between old and new life dimensions. Loss of connection was not only physical but remoteness from ancestral cultural roots, language, traditional stories also played an important role in re-shaping of Natives. This is how they became homeless within the home. Bhabha (1992) in *The World and the Home* creates a difference between un-homed and homeless. He illustrates it as you are at home but you do not feel at home because you do not know yourself. As a result, you become alien, frightful and hybrid identity in your own home and native land (p. 141).

This feeling of homelessness is an outcome of different social, economic, political, cultural and historical factors. Alcohol consumption in life of Natives becomes another reason for their shattered and chaotic images. In his essay, "Images of Drinking in Woman Singing, Ceremony, and House Made of Dawn" Warner (1984) says, "Not surprisingly, the issue of the "drunken Indian" has also preoccupied a number of Native American writers, ... offer strikingly complementary visions of Indian drinking". (pp. 15-30) He further says that all these writers avoid "the easy moralizing of temperance fables or of earlier sentimental tales of naive noble red men corrupted by liquor-dealing white devils, they all view drinking as a major source of Indian alienation and cultural decay". (pp. 15-30)

The touch of Momaday's autobiographical elements is evident in *House Made of Dawn* as he himself shuffled among two cultures in his life. He belonged to a Kiowa descent and attached to his tribe through his father's storytelling practice and ritual. As Silko (2003) also describes that stories become a reason to bring people closer and binds them with same heritage and shared past. Stories create a collective consciousness which keeps family or clan intact. People do not feel isolated because they share a common past and common experiences (p. 59). Momaday in *House Made of Dawn* highlights different situations of cultural remoteness which affect native individuality and disturb them emotionally

3. Theoretical Framework

Polish social psychologist, Tajfel, Turner, Jost, and Sidanius (1982), is a prominent theorist whose understanding of social identity gives a parameter to identify the psychological and social imbalance in natives' sense of self-esteem and self-image.

Tajfel proposed stereotyping of society into them and us. He categorizes society on the basis of social stratification to impart a sense of belonging and self-esteem. In this fragmented, chaotic and psychologically split post-modern world, it is necessary to define and determine one's identity through inclination towards some social group.

Tajfel sees individuals in association to social groups to protect their identity as Islam (2014) says: "... individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity" (pp. 1781-1783). Further he says, "The result is an identification with a collective, depersonalized identity based on group membership and imbued with positive aspects (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987)."

Tajfel and Turner (2004) in the chapter "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour" comment that individuals of social group share their emotions and social affiliations and in this way maintain self-realization and self-actualization in a society. They assert that individuals affiliate themselves with a group which develops a sense of belongingness and members of the group share common emotions and social consciousness. Social stratification become cognitive tool that signifies the social environment in an order and allows the members to do social action accordingly (pp. 15-16).

Tajfel's theory of social identity provides specific lens to look at stereotyping and social stratification from a different perspective as he (2004) says that most of the societies are based on different stereotypes which define the structure of that society. He talks about three functions of those stereotypes which are social causality, social justification, and social differentiation (p.68). He further explains these three functions. According to Tajfel and Turner (2004), social causality seeks to establish an understanding of complexity of social events.

Social justification tries to elaborate and justify the committed and desired actions in a specific stereotyped social setting. Social differentiation refers to ethnocentrism which enhances and stresses stereotypic differences and binaries in a positive way (p.68).

4. Alienation in Native Americans

Alienation in Native Americans is the outcome of multiple factors. Alcohol consumption is one of those alarming reasons which alienate them from their own sacred rituals and ethnicity. Their tribal culture is their identity and source of belongingness. Alcoholism makes them unconscious of their own roots and culture. As Warner (1984) remarks that alcohol consumption become a major factor for alienation and it eventually creates distance between Abel and his heritage. His tribal customs do not allow such moral weaknesses which shatter them both physically as well as emotionally. Alcohol brings one closer to disease and death (p. 21). The very first appearance of protagonist in the novel shows his severe indulgence to alcoholism. He is out of senses as he returns from war and his first interaction with his grandfather is when he was in an unconscious state of mind due to drinking. Abel's grandfather Francisco sees a bus coming close and he sees "The door swung open and he fell against his grandfather and was unable to recognize him. His wet lips hung loose and his eyes were half closed and rolling" (p. 8).

Abel lost his senses and was unable to see his grandfather. He could not even recognize the native land to which he belonged. So, as Warner (1984) asserts about alcohol consumption effects, "it separates him from the grandfather who had raised him, and who is closely associated with Indian rituals" (p. 21).

Abel has committed murder in a dispute and was sent to jail. His physical remoteness from his land further alienated and distanced him from his culture. Momaday (2010) depicts Abel as a shattered and torn native who has come to a new socio-cultural white world after his release from prison and is unable to identify his familiar past, "He was in pain. He had fallen down; that was it" (p. 88). His body and mind both were suffering from pain. He gets fainted with intensity of pain. Further Momaday says, "When he awoke, he tried to move; he was numb with cold, but the effort to move brought new pain, sharp, then massive pain." (p. 89). He was unconscious because of alcohol consumption and felt so pain that he wanted to die. It was not only alcohol but there was a sense of remoteness and alienation from the land which intensified his pain.

Remoteness of natives from their land brings not only pain but also emotional detachment for them. They are incomplete when they are away from their cultural roots. After his return to the land, he still feels torn because now white culture has replaced the native ethnicity with new norms and standards. That is why, on his return to home, Abel does not feel at home.

5. Forgetfulness of Past and Non-Acceptability of New

Abel's life is split between two dimensions; before and after the war. Abel seems silent and uncommunicative before war. But his life in Los Angeles after war and his release from prison is also disturbed one. He was unable to adapt modern life and had left his ancestral traditions behind. So he was a misfit in both situations. He quits job and leaves Milly as an unrequited relation. Francisco, the grandfather, represents the ancestral culture of Abel. But when he returns to reservation, Francisco dies. His grandfather's death brings a transitional shift in his life. He loses strong connection to his past and traditions. His return to land had intensified his sense of a psychological shattered self, "His return to the town had been a failure, for all his looking forward" (p. 53). Abel was so disturbed and alienated that he wanted to talk to his grandfather but he was unable to communicate with the head of the family. He felt himself so distanced. He was unable to pray and sing. Songs are always of great importance in tribal communities as songs are a vital part of their heritage, culture and memories. Even the words of natives do have a particular familiar rhythm but Abel was unable to practice traditional customs of the land. This forgetfulness and remoteness alienate him.

Past shapes one's present. Remembrance of past allows to preserve the identity of natives. Memories of past inspire an association and feeling of belongingness in contrast to alienation and fragmentation. Even prayers were considered holy as a ceremony for natives and a traditional glimpse of Native Indians' ethnicity and culture. Abel always felt connected

when he remembered his past: "He remembered the prayer, and he knew what it meant – not the words, which he had never really heard, but the low sound itself, rising and falling far away in his mind, unmistakable and unbroken (p. 9).

Nostalgic feelings are always there in natives. Natives live in a culture and air which gives them an association and recognition of strong bodies and strong heads. They enjoy this strength of limbs. But as they get distanced from the land, they are bereft of their strength as well. The strength is in the connection to land and soil. Memories haunt Able in a nostalgic tone. He had always loved his body which was hard and quick. His hard and quick body refers to particular tribal physical strength and feature which they do share as a native community. The way natives are structured, it helps them to be quick and responsive in their atmosphere. Even the body structures are same which create a sense of belongingness and identity among them. (p. 71)

6. Lack of Social Identity

In Native cultures, fatherhood is a symbol of belongingness and identity. Abel's existence without recognition and name of father becomes an important factor in his alienation and lack of social identity. Even being a native, he becomes an outsider: "he did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and Vidal somehow foreign and strange" (p. 11).

Native culture is not static yet it is transferred from one generation to the other. It remains alive for new generations with same dignity and sense of responsibility which comes naturally along with the transferring of native culture. Tradition of storytelling was also being transferred from generations to generations in the blood of Native Americans. This tradition of storytelling was not mere stories for them but something more. As Abel says about her grandmother's habit of storytelling, "She told me stories, and she taught me how to listen. (p. 103). Abel listened those stories in his childhood so those stories became a part of his life. His grandmother was unable to read and write. This refers to oral tradition of the natives. Their stories were communicated and transferred to next generations orally. Their ancestors taught them to listen and live through words and sound of the stories because they belonged to those stories. According to Momaday listening process is more difficult and crucial than reading or writing in language. It is language which secures one's identity as a member of a certain culture and it restores the status and belongingness through the account of past traditions. Even old women of that culture also had a significant role in this maintenance and celebration of the tribe rituals. As Abel says, "My grandmother was a storyteller; she knew her way around words. She never learned to read and write, but somehow she knew the good of reading and writing; she had learned how to listen and delight." (Momaday, 2010)

Indian native culture was so rich and deeply rooted that one's lack of social inclination and belongingness disturbs one's self-esteem and self-image. It is considered vital to keep the connection consciously intact between land and people so they may not face identity crisis.

Whites used blackness of Natives as a manipulation tool in this adventurous political colonial expedition. On the other hand, natives celebrate their blackness because this blackness is their identity and brings them closer to their cultural roots. *House Made of Dawn* truly depicts the inabilities and dependency of blacks in this new alien White world as said, "His hands were broken, and he could not move them" (p. 71). Abel was unable to move but still the blood, shedding from his injured hands, had its blackness intact as a symbol of identity flowing through it, "the blood was dry and black" (p. 71). So even the blood of natives has turned from red to black. Their blackness runs through their blood which cannot be eroded.

7. Power of Language in White Mission

Language is always used as a powerful tool in the process of political discursive reconstruction and erosion of cultures. Momaday depicts Tosamah, the Priest of the Sun as a white man with long sermons and manipulation through words as he says, "... and language in turn is crucial to human society" (p. 67). Momaday stresses on the power of words when used in traditional manner as Tosamah says, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe" (p. 65). Momaday becomes cynical in his description of John and his dull, long speech in which he had nothing to say but he had a mission to preach his version of truth.

Momaday says, "He tried to make it bigger and better than it was... He imposed his idea of God upon the everlasting Truth" (p. 66).

White man's mission depends on their preaching through cunning use of words. As Tosamah tells, "... old John was a white man, and the white man has his ways" (p. 66). He further says about white man: "He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth." (p. 66). Not only speech is important but listening can also be learned. In Momaday's view, listening is also based on the practice or rituals inherited by one's culture. Speech was important for shaping the identity of both the natives and the whites. Tosamah's speech is a retelling of his grandmother's stories of the past. It was the grandmother who taught him, "... how to live among her words, how to listen and delight" (p. 67).

8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight how the intrusion of white people in native land has shattered natives emotionally, psychologically and culturally. It is investigated that in the absence of social identity the natives feel alienated and homeless within the home. Social identity shapes self-esteem and ethnic association towards a tribe. Natives are caught between the forgetfulness of past and acceptance of new. They are unable to relate them to their ancestral roots and this inability and rootlessness alienate them resultantly. Power of language through sermons and storytelling ritual is also evident in cultural shaping and re-shaping. Abel's character is fighting for the survival throughout the novel but he is unable to associate him with any culture, neither the old one nor the new, so, he experiences homelessness within the home and becomes a misfit. This study opens new dimensions to explore self-stereotyping to restore and maintain the identity of Natives by questioning the Western agenda of essentialism and authenticity.

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