
UNIT 1 NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Origins of Native American Literature
 - 1.2.1 Oral Literature
 - 1.2.2 Themes of Oral Literature
 - 1.2.3 Genres of Oral Literature
- 1.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.4 Questions
- 1.5 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall discuss the variety, diversity and richness of Native American cultures and literature in this unit. The innumerable tribes, their languages, the genres of their oral literature will figure in this introductory unit. I shall also give you samples of Native American literature to provide you some idea of the cultures, concerns and literary skills of these peoples.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

America, both North and South, was inhabited by native tribes for thousands of years before the Europeans colonized the continent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is estimated that there were five million natives in what is now the United States when the Europeans came. The American Indians are believed to have migrated from Asia over a land bridge (now submerged) near Alaska about 28,000 years ago. They spread far and wide over many parts of North and South America and the adjacent islands. The Indians represented a broad spectrum of cultures. Some of them were small groups dependent on agriculture; at the other end of the cultural spectrum were the great civilizations of Mexico and Peru. These had well-developed economic and political structures, art-forms and advanced technologies.

The Indians built cities by the beginning of the Christian era. They grew corn, potato, and another plants. They account for half the food supply of the world now. In astronomy, mathematics and related disciplines, the Mayas were more advanced than the Europeans. It is significant that their great achievements were their own and did not receive any help from outside. Some of the great Indian civilizations which flourished were Olmec (in Southwest Mexico) from 1500 B.C. to 300 A.D., Maya (in Yucatan peninsula) from 1000 B.C. to 1517 A.D. (the arrival of the Spanish); Zapotec (in Mount Alban Oaxaca) from 600B.C. to 900A.D. and Teotihuacan (in the valley of Mexico) from 200 B.C. to 600 A.D. The Aztecs controlled the land from the Pacific to the Atlantic for three centuries until they were defeated by the Spanish in 1521.

The Indian tribes maintained their tribal identities as Cherokees, Apaches, Hopis and so on; they had not thought of all the tribes as Indians. The linguistic and cultural diversities among the tribes were many. The Alonquian of the North East, the Sioux of the Plains, the Pueblos of the Southwest have different histories, religions, cultures and languages.

Among the Indians living in America, there were between one thousand to two thousand languages and as many cultures. However, at the time of the European contact, there were some three hundred cultural groups who spoke over two hundred languages. These were further reduced to about 150 by the middle of the twentieth century. These surviving languages have been classified into forty-two language families. Some of the Indian languages such as Olmec, Maya and Zapotec developed their own writing systems. They used ideographic glyphs comparable to ancient Egyptian and Chinese writing systems. The Mayas produced paper books known as codices which can be folded like a screen. The largest of these codices is called the Madrid codex which measured 23 feet with 56 leaves; each leaf was 9" x 5". We shall discuss later how highly the Indians regarded the word. Speech for them was as vital as breath.

1.2 ORIGINS OF NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

The European settlers wrongly assumed that American literature started with them in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. It started and flourished many centuries, perhaps millenia, before the European arrival. N. Scott Momaday stated the position correctly: "American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language". The history of Native American literatures reflects the tribal cultures and the experience and imagination of its authors. It also tells us something about relations between the Indian tribes and the whites.

1.2.1 Oral Literature

Given the long history of Native Americans, oral literature in several forms was dominant in many cultures. The oral tradition influenced even the written works which came later. The central belief of Native Americans, to whichever tribe they belonged, was the need to live in harmony with the physical and spiritual universe. In their understanding, breath, speech and verbal art (songs, oratory, etc) are closely connected. In fact, in many cultures these three are often signified by the same word. For instance, in Navajo culture, the emergence myth shows that in the beginning there were the word and the thing, the symbol and the object. For the Navajos, "symbol is word, and word is means by which substance is organized and transformed". The inter-relation among knowledge, thought and speech in Navajo culture is expressed in their "Beginning of the Earth Song".

The earth will be, from ancient
times with me there is knowledge of it.
The mountains will be, from ancient
times with me there is knowledge of it.
[and so on mentioning other things to be]

The earth will be, from the very
beginning I have thought it.
The mountains will be, from the very
beginning I have thought it.
[and so on]

The earth will be, from ancient times
I speak it.
The mountains will be, from ancient times
I speak it.
[and son on]

The songs which are sung at their magic rituals direct the thought which is the source of generative power. The native Americans had great reverence for the word because they believed in the symbolic power of the word to change the world for better or worse. Even silence has its own power. Silence is described as the sanctuary of sound. "Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; there they are sacred". The following Yokut's prayer illustrates the power of the word to help a person to adapt to the universe:

My words are tied in one
With the great mountains,
With the great rocks,
With the great trees,
In one with my body
And my heart.
Do you all help me
With supernatural power,
And you, Day
And you, Night!
All of you see me
One with this world!

(Qtd. by Ruoff pp.7-8)

1.2.2 Themes of Oral Literature

Let us now consider some of the important and recurrent themes in the oral literatures of the native Americans. These literatures voice a strong desire for harmony which is related to their deep reverence for land. In his *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday says: "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it". **The native American literatures, both oral and written, stress directionality and circularity frequently. The numeral four is a sacred number in the native American mythology. The directions, seasons, stages of human life are counted as four in each category. This sacred number recurs in the content and form of literatures. Multiples of four are also frequent. Number six representing the four main directions and above and below the earth are also common. The circle is another recurring symbol in native literatures. It symbolises the sun and the earth. Human life is seen as cyclical. The circle is important in tribal ceremonies and dances. The mythic culture heroes and heroines who leave the tribe come back after many trials and adventures, thus completing a circular journey. Yet another recurring theme in native American literature is the strong fellow-feeling and helpfulness. The sense of solidarity with the community and with the land may be noticed in the following Keres song:**

I add my breath to your breath
That our days may be long on the Earth
That the days of our people may be long
That we may be one person
That we may finish our roads together
May our mother bless you with life
May our life paths be fulfilled.

(Qtd. By Ruoff on p.11)

The native's realization of the importance of harmony is seen in their literary composition. Age and experience are respected and valued. An Ojibwa (an Indian tribe) writer, George Copway says, "if you reverence the aged many will be glad to hear of your name". Apart from these themes which are common to the literatures of many Indian tribes, there are a few which are specific to certain tribes. For instance, the Hopis stress hard work; the Navajos who are nomads stress movement.

American Indian literature reflects the mythology and past history as well as the experiences of the present. For instance, there is considerable improvisation each time a performer begins an Iroquois ritual. He does not repeat what he had memorized, but composes afresh on each occasion. The oral literatures are held sacred by the tribes and outsiders are not allowed access to them. In the performance of American Indian verbal arts, audience participation is very important since the audience is bound to the performer.

1.2.3 Genres of Oral Literature

American Indian oral literature uses many genres. The most popular is perhaps *ritual drama* in which chants, ceremonies, and ritual play a part. Words are endowed with occult power; they are the key to the idea of a song, the sacred language used during these rituals is not understood by the common people. It is meant for communication among medicine men and their helpers only. In certain tribes like the Sioux, common words are transformed into sacred vocabulary by certain linguistic processes like affixation, reduplication, inversion and the use of a variety of stylistic features. The ritual dramas are performed by priests, singers, shamans and special groups. Priests are found among planters and medicine men; they don't need inspiration to perform. Shamans are found among hunter gatherers. They perform spirit flight, find lost souls, cure illness and foretell future events.

A second form of oral literature is song. In fact, it is the largest part of the oral literature. Songs are the greatest pleasure for Ojibwas. For them, every phase of life is expressed in music. Songs are so much a part of their daily life that "if an Indian visits another reservation one of the first questions asked on his return is: "What new songs did you learn?" for the Papago tribe, a song is "magic which calls upon the powers of Nature and constrains them to man's will". For the Navajo, a song is a form of prayer. The songs may be composed by individuals or by a group. The songs may be religious, ceremonial, social, secular, recreational or occasional, or combinations of these elements. Repetition, enumeration and incremental development are among the technical features of the songs. The Tewa prayer given below shows incremental development of the metaphor of the sky loom:

Song of the Sky Loom

Oh our Mother the Earth, Oh our Father the Sky
Your children are we, and with tired backs
We bring you the gifts that you love.
Then weave for us the garment of brightness;
May the warp be the white light of the morning,
May the weft be the red light of the evening,
May the fringes be the falling rain,
May the border be the standing rainbow.
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness

That we may walk fittingly where grass is green,
Oh our Mother the Earth, oh our Father the sky

(Qtd. by Ruoff p.30)

The songs celebrate major events in human life, birth or naming, arrival of puberty, healing, death and burial. Songs are also part of the fertility rites which ensure survival of the group. There are personal lyrics like the wind songs of the Kiowas. (Momaday was a Kiowa). These wind songs are actually war songs which describe loneliness and longing on the vast open prairies where only "the sweep of the wind broke the silence". The personal lyrics also include lullabies, women's work songs, hunting songs and elegies.

Yet another genre of the oral literature is **narrative**. These are of three types:

Native American Literature

- i) true and fictional
- ii) sacred and non-sacred
- iii) combination of (i) and (ii)

These narratives emphasize external behaviour. The characters are one dimensional and they rarely express thought or emotion. The settings are simple, and the style terse. The narratives are compressed and episodic. There are inconsistencies of time, logic and detail.

The narratives in Papago, for instance, have a neat structure: introduction, one or more episodes, and conclusion. In the introduction, the time, place (setting) and participants in harmony are presented. Each episode which follows will have a thesis such as disruption of harmony and antithesis which describes measures taken to overcome the disharmony. The conclusion describes the restored harmony.

The common themes of the narratives are the creation of the world, origins and migration of the tribe and adventures of culture heroes. The emergence myths describe the "ascent of beings from under the surface of the earth to its surface and their subsequent settlement or migration". There are variations on the theme of the creation myth in different cultures. In the southwest, the native myths depict the formation of the world through struggle and robbery; in the northwest, the Iroquoians believed that the world was created by a fall from the sky world to the water world.

There are a number of stories about culture heroes who are of divine origin. Their father is usually the sun, wind or stone and mother a lesser being. The culture hero has extraordinary powers to change various aspects of nature into their final shapes; he can also transform beings into animals or humans. The culture hero is superior to all; he is cunning; he is a trickster. He stole fire. The trickster transformer is a male in many tribes; he could be a female as in the Hopi tribe.

Another oral form of native literature is *oratory*. This could be of three types (i) ceremonial, (ii) non-ceremonial, (iii) a combination of (i) and (ii). Oratory is used for settling political and legal questions. In ritual oratory, the hero's journey from one place to another is described. There are speeches for initiation ceremonies. Among non-ceremonial speeches may be mentioned council meetings, welcome addresses and exhortation to warriors. Protest speeches against white invaders call for solidarity of the Indians.

Autobiography is another, popular genre in Indian literature, oral and written. The first autobiography was that of a Pequot, William Apes, and it is entitled *A Son of the Forest* (1829). George Copway set a trend with his autobiography, *Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* (1847). He is an Ojibwa who presents Indian family life to counteract the negative image of savagery. He blends myth, history and personal experience and uses an oratorical style. Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), an Indian doctor, moved from nomadic tribal life to sophisticated homes and institutions in the United States and England. He interacted with Matthew Arnold, H.W. Longfellow, R.W. Emerson and Theodore Roosevelt. He narrates his experiences in his life story, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). John Joseph Matthews (Osage) was inspired by Henry David Thoreau. His autobiography *Talking to the Moon* (1945) is structured on Osage names and individual months. N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa) *Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) is a sophisticated account of Kiowas' origin and migration to Oklahoma. It depicts a quest for tribal roots. Three chapters in this book deal with the emergence, ascendance and decline of Kiowa culture. The author uses myth, history and personal experience. The book pays tribute to tribal, family and personal memory and emphasizes the inevitability of change and loss. Momaday uses a poetic style. His *The Names* (1976) is also an autobiographical narrative in which he uses the stream of consciousness technique. He believes that individuals are shaped by the location they inhabit.

Native American literatures have a rich and varied tradition. They dealt with the principal concerns of their tribes, origin and migration of the tribes, the relationship of the tribe to the land and to the community. Oral literature flourished for millenia among the Indian tribes.

1.3 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I attempted to introduce ancient American Indian literature, its traditions, themes, genres and techniques. It was a predominantly oral literature celebrating the life, beliefs, aspirations, successes and frustrations of the Indians over many millenia. American Indian literature existed and flourished long before the Europeans colonized America.

1.4 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the Indian cultures before the European contact.
2. What are the major themes in the Indian literatures? Briefly discuss them.
3. Discuss with appropriate illustrations the main genres used in oral literatures by the Indian tribes.
4. Describe the several prose forms in Indian literatures.

1.5 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. *Engyclopedia Americana*, Article on "American Indians", vol.15.
2. Ruoff, A.LaVonne Brown. *American Indian Literatures: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review and Selected Bibliography*, New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990.
3. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Macropedia) Article on "Native American Peoples". Vol.13 Fifteenth Edition, 1997.
4. Velie, Alan R. *American Indian Literature: An Anthology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979.
5. Wiget, Andrew. *Native American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

UNIT 2 NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Beginnings
- 2.3 Fiction in Early Twentieth Century
- 2.4 Recent Fiction
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, I wish to trace the main contours of Native American fiction. I shall discuss the work of the prominent novelists and their contribution to the American Indian fiction. Such a background will provide a proper perspective for the appreciation of Momaday's work which I will examine in the next three units.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The oral tradition of Native American literatures continues even to this day. It is modified and adapted to suit changing conditions. The growth of written literature in Indian cultures has impacted beneficially on oral literatures. Written creative work supplements, but it does not supplant, the rich and resilient oral traditions of American Indian literature.

We noticed in Unit I that prose narratives like autobiographies are popular among the Indians; we also observed that several of the successful autobiographies were skillful blends of myth, history and personal experiences. With the use of prose for generations, it is only natural for American Indian writers to attempt prose fiction for self expression.

2.2 THE BEGINNINGS

It is believed that Elias Boudinot's (Cherokee) small book, *Poor Sarah, or Religion Exemplified in the Life and Death of an Indian Woman*, which was published in 1823 was the first book of fiction by a native American. In this book, a white woman describes through a series of sketches her relationship to a poor Indian woman, Sarah. The faith of Sarah makes the sophisticated narrator feel embarrassed. Boudinot may have had a dual purpose in writing this fiction. He may have wanted to show that Indians like Sarah can be educated and converted to Christianity. He may have wished to teach a lesson to the New Englanders who thought that they were superior to Indians. Perhaps Boudinot's book is not strictly a work of fiction because its religious tone is rather obtrusive. However, John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854) may be taken as a novel meant for entertainment. It is a story of revenge of a Mexican who was ill-treated and deceived by the Anglos. His farm was taken away by force, his wife was raped before him and his half-brother was killed on an unsubstantiated charge of stealing horses. He takes to a career of

crime including robberies and murders. The novel is formless, but it became popular because of the desperado's daring acts. Joaquin Muriet became a folk-hero in California.

Alex Posey of the Creek Nation added the dimension of humour to a series of letters supposedly written by a fictitious man called Fus Fixico. The Creek Nation was expecting statehood for Indian Territory. Fixico exposes the manipulative politics of the government. He puns on the names of those involved to show the seamy side of their character. Thus, Stewart becomes Stew it, Robert Owen is Rob It Owing. Hitchcock is It's Cocked and Roosevelt is Rooster Feather.

Charles Eastman, a Sioux doctor, whom I mentioned in Unit I in connection with his autobiography was also a short story writer. Some of these are animal fables. For instance, "The Great Cat's Nursery", presents the story through the point of view of a puma mother who sacrifices her life for her cub. The theme of the relationship of knowledge, respect and communication between the hunter and his quarry is dramatized in the story, "The Grey Chieftain". Another writer of stories, Zitkala-sa (Red Bird) deals with problems of acculturation of the natives in a white society. What the natives are when they are at home, and their age-old beliefs and customs are ridiculed and discouraged in the mission schools. The conflict arising out of two faiths, tribal and Christian, in conflict is vividly brought out by Zitkala-sa in her story, "The Soft-hearted Sioux".

Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods* (1899) is autobiographical and apocalyptic. Pokagon had the distinction of meeting President Abraham Lincoln to negotiate a higher price for the sale of the land which later became Chicago. He was known as the "best-educated full-blooded Indian of his time" and as the Indian Longfellow. In his novel which was published posthumously, the hero, Simon, sees Lonidaw with a white deer wearing a multi-coloured wreath. She is the future "queen of the woods". Lonidaw falls in love with Simon, but the white deer pines away. Simon and Lonidaw marry and raise two children, Olondaw and Hazeleye. The boy is sent away to school although his mother had a premonition. She dreams of a snake which eats two small robins one of which is changed to Olondaw. Dream becomes reality as Olondaw returns home an alcoholic and dies soon. As for the daughter, Hazeleye, her canoe overturns after a drunken fisherman's boat hits it. The mother jumps in to save her, but in vain. Lonidaw contracts pneumonia and dies later. Simon promises his wife to fight for temperance. There is an apocalyptic vision of King Alcohol, robed in America's stars and stripes; snakes and ravens come out and stalk the land, parodying a popular painting of the period, *American Progress*, by John Gast. The destruction of the Indians is complete when they perish on account of spontaneous combustion. The earlier sections of the novel are idyllic and the final section, apocalyptic. Pokagon's aim is great, but he is unequal to the task of realizing it in convincing fictional terms. He uses a number of symbols and motifs to reinforce his meaning: the snake, the white deer, the drunken fisherman, etc. There is also an undercurrent of irony in this tragic story.

Thus the foundation for the growth and development of prose fiction authored by Native American writers was laid in the nineteenth century.

2.3 FICTION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century produced Native American novelists with greater sophistication in the selection and handling of their themes. Hum-ishu-ma (Mourning Dove) is of mixed Irish and Indian parentage. Her novel, *Eogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927) depicts the fortunes of Cogewea. Cogewea is brought up by her Indian grand mother as her Irish father went to Alaska, leaving her behind. The girl returns from an Indian school and starts working for John Carter, her brother-in-law, on his Idaho

ranch. Two young men. Jim LaGrinder (another halfblood) and Alfred Densmore, an easterner, are attracted to her. During the summer, the grand mother and her younger sister join the girl on the ranch. They advise her against any liaison with Densmore. As it turns out, he has a finance in the east and is wooing Cogewea with an eye on her property. Cogewea disregards the advice of her grand mother and elopes with Densmore. He finds out soon that she is not wealthy, robs her of whatever money she had with her and runs away. This experience with a white man is a bitter lesson for Cogewea. She then responds to Jim LaGrinder's affection and marries him. Fortune smiles on her as she gets a large amount of money through her father's gold prospecting. This was possible because of a legal lacuna in her father's will.

The characters are all types fitting into a romance which was popular in the first few decades of the twentieth century. This is the first novel written by a woman which provides sidelights on relations between the natives and the whites and on their sexual morality.

John Milton Oskison, a Cherokee Indian fiction writer, published both short stories and novels. The Indian Territory is the setting for his novels. *Wild Harvest* (1925) is another frontier romance. The principal characters are Tom Winger and Nan Forest. Rival suitors, seduction and crime complicate the plot of this novel. Indian characters have a marginal role. Oskison's second novel, *Black Jack Davey* (1926) deals with the romance of Davey Dawes and Mary Keene. Dawes and other white men settle on allotted land in Oklahoma, but they are resisted by Jerry Boyd who marries a Cherokee woman so that he can own the land in his wife's name. Boyd is killed in the end. The Depression of the 30s provided the subject matter for the next novel, *Brothers Three* (1935). The three Odell brothers have Cherokee blood in them; they grow up on their father's ranch in Indian Territory. The eldest of the three, Timmy, becomes a businessman in a small town. Roger, the second brother, mismanages cattle business, loses heavily in mining industry and becomes a drunkard. He is paralysed after a road accident. The third brother, Henry, becomes a writer in New York. Initially he recovers his brother's losses on the stock market, but loses everything in the Great Crash of 1929. The part-Cherokee wife, May persuades the family to get back to their traditional land and work hard to re-build their fortunes. Thus, loyalty to land and to the native's moorings hold hope of recovery and survival for the Odells.

John Joseph Mathews (Osage) has had a distinguished academic career before he published his novel, *Sundown* (1934). The novel is set in Osage country at the end of the nineteenth century. That was a time when oil business raked in huge profits. That was also a period during which the full-blood Osages and the mixed-blood Osages were drifting apart. Mathews was conscious of his own mixed-blood. Chal Windzer, the hero of *Sundown*, is born of a progressive father and a full-blood mother who is attracted to the land and distrusted the whites. Chal seeks the approval of girls even though he does not like them; he envies the full-blood boys although they bully him now and then.

Education is an important shaping force in Chal's life. An eastern teacher who taught him at reservation school, wants to make sure that Indians as described by Fenimore Cooper in his novels do not exist in contemporary America. He enrolls in college along with two of his full-blood friends, Running Elk and Sun-On His Wings. They are all admitted because of their football power's. Chal's two friends cannot reconcile themselves to the patronizing attitudes and demands for conformity at the college. So they go back to the reservation. Chal also wants to be accepted even by those whom he hates because of their hypocrisy. He is humiliated at college, but he hides his anger under a smile; later he transfers his pent-up anger to the quarter back (in football). When Chal stands behind the other player he feels like slashing off his neck. When his friend, the full-blood Running Elk, resists punishment, Chal compares him to a noble buffalo, opposing a pack of wolves. While Chal admires the integrity of his companion, he feels ashamed of his own meek submission to paddling. When his two friends leave the college, he is in a way happy because the others can no longer

accuse him of keeping the company of such "backward" people. The full-blood Indians stubbornly refuse to join the world of the white man: Chal is sorry for them. At the same time he hates himself for not being a true Indian who can give vent to his desire to run, to strip down, to dance, to swim or to sing at the highest pitch.

Because of his inner conflicts and ambivalence, Chal fails to build mature relationships. At college he meets the college queen, Blossom Daubeney. He dreams of transforming himself into a successful business man or an "elegant man of the world" and get rid of his Osage inheritance. As he goes to sleep, he wishes that "I didn't have a God damn drop of Indian blood in me". During World War I, he joins the Army Air Corps; he meets a married white woman, Lou Kerry, who mistakes him for a Spaniard. Chal is a changed man after the war; he has no motivation and is indolent. He feels like a stranger among traditionalists and in the small town. He is not interested in material prosperity. The novelist depicts the rise of indolence and vice as a consequence of the oil boom in Osage country in the second half of the novel. This is symbolically presented through the ebb and flow of derricks over the prairies. On his father's death, Chal inherits \$25,000; he moves to Oklahoma. He has neither the need nor the inclination to work now. Occasionally his conscience is pricked because he has traveled too far from his tribe. But his attitude does not change. The first intimations of his metamorphosis flash on his mind's eye when he listens to Watching Eagle's speech on the consequences of following the white American's way of life. At this speech the murder of Running Elk is announced. The full-blood Osage had become a drug addict and an alcoholic. Chal is troubled by the import of the speech and the impact of the murder. He drives his car at high speed, stops in a field, and asserts his independence by dancing. He realizes that he is a glorious male..... a brother to the wind, the lightning and the forces that came out of the earth".

The collapse of the oil boom brings in its wake a trail of misery including suicides and murders. Roan Horse tells the Senate's investigating committee that it was late by a quarter of century. Chal feels Roan Horse is the champion of the Osages. On his return home his mother questions Chal about his return home, his mother questions Chal about his future plans. He says that he will become an orator and go to Harvard Law School. The mere thought of it reassures him.

Chal may not have changed in a fundamental sense after a turbulent life. He is impressed by two speeches, that of Watching Eagle and of Roan Horse. These speeches articulate in a succinct manner Chal's own experiences and strong emotions. His experience, he comes to realize, is but one episode in the long history of the Osages. That something significant had occurred to their small world is a valuable insight he gains and gets it confirmed in the speeches of Watching Eagle and Roan Horse,

Sundown deals with the delicate issue of race relations between the Indians and the whites, the humiliations and aspirations of the Indians, the misery caused to the Indians by abandoning their land, people and mores, and by running after the alluring but false models of progress and success. Chal Widzer is a stereotype of a man, who is "caught between two worlds" one fading, the other moving forward menacingly.

The next novelist of importance among the Indians is D'Arcy McNickle. He was an administrator, historian, and an anthropologist. He believed in the multiplicity of tribal cultures and was against assimilation. *The Surrounded* (1936) is the story of Archilde Leon, who returns from school in Oregon to his Flathead reservation. The reservation is located in a valley known as *Sniel-emen*. This Indian expression means "mountains of the surrounded". The natives are surrounded and destroyed there. The novel brings out clearly the sense of entrapment felt by the Indians in the midst of alien laws, religion and exploitation by the whites. The Indians are constantly under watch so no one can escape the ring of oppression.

With the advantage of education and interaction with "Progressive" elements, Archilde Leon, the central figure in the novel, is expected to break the vicious circle. His father, Max Leon, has high hopes for him. But the Jesuit, Fr. Grepilloux, likens Archilde to Big Paul who was killed when he attempted to bring the Indians and whites together. The priest feels that education and Christianity have replaced the old world of the Indians. He hopes the boy might be the "promise of a new day". Archilde's father and the priest are cut off from the harsh realities of life on the reservation. He is disturbed by the agony of his tribe.

The alienation and agony of the son are paralleled in his mother's life. Catherine Running Wolf, becomes a convert to Christianity and earns the nick-name, "Faithful Catherine" because of her devotion. Her marriage to Max Leon shattered her life because the culture of the white men was different. The whites changed their place of residence; they lived by the clock; they turned away relatives. The white man's way of life and value-system are very different from the Indian's. As the wife and husband drift apart, she implicates Max Leon in a cattle-rustling scheme. She withdraws into her traditional life and he lives apart following his own customs. They communicate through intermediaries.

Catherine persuades her son, Archilde, to take her for hunting on the mountains. There they find Louis who has killed a doe. A game warden shoots Louis while trying to arrest him for poaching. Catherine who could not control her pent-up anger throws a hatchet into the game warden's skull. It is an unpardonable sin for a woman reputed to be "Faithful Catherine". She abandons Christianity as she feels that she is segregated in a heaven inhabited by whites exclusively. She refuses the services of a priest.

Archilde takes upon himself the murderous actions of his mother. He escapes with Elise LaRose, an attractive and assertive boarding school runaway. He takes Louis's boys also with him. Sheriff Quigley attempts to arrest them. Elise shoots him, but the Indian Agent arrests them and handcuffs them.

Most of the characters in this novel feel ensnared; they are victimized by the system which they perpetuate. The Indians are not alone in being entrapped. Archilde's father, Max Leon, realizes the utter folly of the actions of the white Christians when he says: "people are freezing to death in those shacks by the church. They don't know why; they had nothing to do with it. You [Moser the trader] and me and father Grepilloux were the ones brought it on. For what good?"

Modern education which was expected to assimilate the two cultures, tribal and white, widened the chasm between them. It also alienated the Indians from their own communities, after such an education, Archilde returns home only to hate the changeless character of the place. Louis, after his schooling, becomes brutal and disrespectful of the elders and hates authority.

The entrapped Indians find a sort of inner peace and strength when they return to their tribal values. Modeste the elder impresses upon Archilde and others the importance of traditional values. Archilde's faith in his people is recovered because "he had really seen it happen". When they dance on July 4, they do so with dignity and refuse to be burdened by circumstance. Catherine's "repaganization" is exemplified in the secular dance on Independence Day. The conclusion of the novel is not exactly on a hopeful note. Archilde, through his education, is rendered a misfit in his tribal culture. Education gave him an alien perspective which does not brook total surrender which a pagan religion sternly demands.

2.4 RECENT FICTION

Among contemporary Indian novelists Leslie Marmon Silko occupies an honoured place. Her novel *Ceremony* (1977) is about a veteran of World War II. Tayo enlisted

much from Rocky. So Tayo was particularly concerned about Rocky's safety and welfare. Unfortunately, Rocky died in Tayo's arms while being sent to a Japanese POW camp. The jungle rain was a nuisance to Tayo. On his demobilization, Tayo returns to his tribe of Laguna Pueblo after active service in the Pacific. Before coming home, he spends sometime in a veterans' hospital in California. He suffers from the burden of war guilt.

On his return, he finds his land hit by drought; he blames himself for it. His uncle Josiah to whom he entrusted a new herd of Mexican spotted cattle had died when he was on combat duty. In his younger days, his Christian aunt taunted him for his mixed blood and for his mother's promiscuous life.

The horrifying experience of the war alienates him from his land, his family, his tribe and his culture. His aunt's Christianity rubs salt into his wounds. Christianity "separated people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul". Teachers teach girls to dress like the white girls. The science teachers talk of science as offering rational explanations to drive away superstitions. The war climaxing in atomic annihilation convinces Tayo that the white world is difficult for the tribal people to understand. His past is of no use to him. His memories are tangled. He experiences a strange physical dissociation from everything around him. He is shattered physically, emotionally and psychologically. The elders tell him that it takes only "one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of the sun, and the fragile world will be injured". A ceremony to reintegrate the broken shreds of Tayo's self is required. His identity could be re-established by imposing on him once again his personal and communal history. But their own rituals do not restore Tayo to good health. The tribal leaders send him to a Navajo medicine man who adapts traditional practices to modern conditions. There is an endless mythic struggle between Witchery seeking death and nurture sustaining life.

Ceremony is a metaphor for the conflict between Tayo and Emo (a witch). Navajo ceremony which is central to Silko's plot needs myth, rites and medicines. While myth outlines the event, rites reproduce prototypical events, and medicines bring about harmony between the prototypical and the historic. The people learn the ceremonies from mythic heroes. These heroes learnt the same from the Holy people, the supernatural patrons. The roles of the patient and medicine man thus become interchangeable. Silko uses the Laguna Myths of Arrowboy and the Gambler and also the Navajo myths of Coyote transformation and Cub Boy. These diverse myths are woven into the myth of Earth Woman's flight and Hummingbird's quest to retrieve her. Betonio, the Navajo medicine man, sends Tayo on a quest for a woman, the spotted cattle, a mountain, and a constellation of stars. Pollen and water are important ingredients of traditional medicine; uranium and alcohol deal death. The Earth Woman figures, the positive forces seek rain, healing, fertility and Tayo's recovery. His restoration and purification contribute to the rejuvenation of his community and its continuance.

Silko uses a narrative structure which like her hero's consciousness is fractured and fragmented in the beginning; But through tribal healing processes and rituals it is re-integrated and becomes a coherent whole. The narrative structure of *Ceremony* reflects the transformation of Tayo's own consciousness. Silko uses the Native American myths to provide a credible structure to her narrative.

In James Welch's novel, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) there is a nameless narrator. He suffers from alienation. When he returns from a hospital after knee surgery to High Plains, where he sees lots of people, he exclaims: "Not one of them meant anything to me. And for no reason, I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance..... The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty". Theresa, the narrator's mother, is an assimilationist and hates Indians (she is herself an Indian) and makes degrading comments. She is very assertive and claims to have killed her son's

pet duck and served him on Thanksgiving Day. His father, First Raise, is a dreamer and a wit. He froze to death in a snowdrift. The narrator's grandmother who lives with them belongs to Blackfeet tribe who are enemies of the Cree tribe. As it happens, the narrator loves a Cree girl, Agnes. Before the narrator returns from hospital, she runs away with his rifle and razor.

The narrator goes in search of Agnes in the nearby towns. He has two types of encounters on the way. A white "airplane man" seeks his help to avoid the F.B.I who are chasing him. It is full of comic incidents. The second set of encounters are with women who drag him into bed. The women remind him of all the domineering women in his life. Watching a film poster in a town, he remembers how his brother, Mose, was killed in a road accident by a speeding car.

When he returns home, he learns that his grandmother is dead. He rides his horse, Bird, to visit Yellow Calf an old Indian who tells him the story of his grandmother and how he helped her in difficult times. Young Calf is the real grandfather of the narrator. On the way back, he finds a cow stuck in a slough and dying of exhaustion. He tries to pull the cow out with his horse's help. The horse dies, the cow goes deeper in the mud, and the narrator crawls out exhausted and drenched in the rain. The story ends with the grandmother's burial and the narrator throwing the tobacco pouch into her grave. There is a thaw in the weather, heralding happier times ahead for the narrator.

Jim Loney, the central figure of Welch's second novel, *The Death of Jim Loney*, is born in a broken home. His father is a white and mother an Indian. She leaves her husband and marries another man. Loney has no love for his home or culture. His girl friend, Rhea, plays a surrogate mother and smothers him; his sister, Kate, intimidates him through sibling rivalry. Loney dreams of a dark bird hovering over him and beckoning him; he also dreams of meeting a woman in a graveyard who is looking for her lost son; Loney wants to help her. He goes hunting and shoots at his step father mistaking him for a bear in the "immense darkness" which symbolizes his own meaningless existence. He attributes his failures and depression to his mother abandoning him. As he awaits his arrest in the mountains, he yearns for a place where there are no lost sons, no mothers searching for them. "There had to be that place, but it was not on this earth". Symbolically he takes shelter in Mission Canyon a place believed by the Indians to be an entrance to the next life. When he is shot and he falls, he sees "the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place".

In his two novels, which display a deep love for the land and the people. He has an intimate knowledge of the complex problems of the Indians, problems which drive them to drink, depression and death.

There are other Indian novelists in the last couple of decades who strike new paths, both in themes and in forms. D'Arcy McNickle's *Wind From an Enemy Sky* focuses on water rights and sacred places. It is also a commentary on the mistaken attempts to displace tribal culture by white customs and values. The natives are more secure in their paganism. Hyemeyohsts Storm (Cheyenne) also stresses the importance of religion in the lives of Native Americans. His first novel, *Seven Arrows* (1972), deals with the decline of the Sun Dance religion and the Brotherhood of the Shields, which together unified the Plains tribes. There are several chain stories connecting the leaders of Cheyenne, Crow, and Sioux tribes. The medicine men tell stories within a larger historical framework which are allegorical. Storm attempts a complex structure in his novel.

In Gerald Vizenor's (Chippewa) *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), Saint Louis Bearheart is a bureaucrat in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His manuscript is discovered by a radical American Indian woman. It depicts the dark future awaiting the Indians. Because of oil shortages, the U.S. government orders felling of trees in the forests including some cedars which are sacred to the Indians. The Indian leaders, Proude and Rosina, lead their people on a journey. The group includes several types

and freaks. The novel has picaresque overtones. Many of the travellers suggest the traditional trickster. The pilgrims encounter Sir Cecil Staples who barter away their lives for the oil. Vizenor has used the themes and forms of the rich oral tradition of Native American literature. He tries to blend the picaresque element of European fiction with the emergence myth of the Native tradition.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

The Native American novelists primary concern is to articulate the trials and tribulations of their people who find it increasingly difficult to come to terms with the transformation of their life from a tribe- and family-oriented small communities to alien social and religious systems which have encroached on them and are fast obliterating their culture and traditions. The overall picture we obtain is one of the Indians being squeezed out, literally and metaphorically. American Indian fiction provides a window on this heart-rending experience of ancient people.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the origins of Native American fiction.
2. Discuss "alienation" as a running theme in early twentieth century Indian novels.
3. What significant changes have occurred in Chal's life?
4. Discuss the theme of entrapment in *The Surrounded*.
5. Examine "Ceremony" as a central metaphor in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel: *Ceremony*.
6. Consider miscegenation as a destructive factor in tribal culture.
7. Write an essay with appropriate illustrations on race relations as depicted by Native American novelists.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Larson, Charles R. *American Indian Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978.

Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N.Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981.

Wiget, Andrew. *Native American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

UNIT 3 THE MAKING OF MOMADAY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Education
- 3.3 Verbal Universe
- 3.4 The Significance of Land
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, I propose to acquaint you with several factors which contributed to the emergence of N.Scott Momaday as a writer, more specifically as a novelist. His Indian inheritance, his education, his literary mentors and models and his interest in drawing and painting are among the shaping forces which need consideration. This Unit also aims to examine Momaday's own views on a variety of topics related to literature. The background, the influences and the views will be of great help in understanding Momaday's novel, *House Made of Dawn*.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

N.Scott Momaday is an American Indian writer. Although a writer cannot completely shake himself off from his racial and cultural legacy, it is not fair to consider the work of any writer from any single perspective. Labelling a writer with ethnic or racial epithets is hardly conducive to a proper and comprehensive study of literature. Ralph Ellision has stated: "Literature is colour-blind, and it should be read and judged in a larger framework". A salutary approach to the study of Momaday's work or the work of any other literary artist is to consider the multiplicity of biographical, cultural, literary and other factors. I shall deal with as many of these as possible to ensure a fuller and better understanding of Momaday's novel.

3.2 EDUCATION

N.Scott Momaday was born on February 27, 1934 in Lawton, Oklahoma. His ancestors belonged to the Kiowa tribe. While many Indians suffered due to disease, military conquest, and deprivation of cultural and religious freedom in the nineteenth century, some managed to survive by adapting themselves to the changed situation. Momaday's grandfather took to agriculture, although it was not in the Kiowa grain. Momaday's father accepted change by getting educated. He retained his Kiowa identity and painted pictures of Kiowa life and culture. Momaday's mother, Natachee Scott was a Cherokee. She too was educated. She too was a painter and author of short stories. She learnt a good deal about the Indian culture by living among seventy different tribes for two years. Thus, both the parents of Momaday learnt to adapt themselves to the white man's culture through education while they kept their tribal ties with Kiowa and Cherokee Indians alive and active. Many other Indians are helplessly caught between two contending cultures and got confused. But Momaday could benefit by absorbing the best of both the cultures. He did not learn the Kiowa

language, but he heard the history and tales of that tribe. He also lived for seven years with his parents on the Navajo reservation. This gave him an idea of Navajo culture and language. He also spent some time at Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico, and got exposure to Pueblo Indian culture. Rio Grande Valley made a deep and lasting impression on the young boy. The grandeur and glory of the dawn and sunset made him feel "the sense that you have lived through genesis and seen into the watch works of geologic time". Momaday is witness to the vast changes taking place in Jemez in the space of a few decades. American culture and technology has transformed the Pueblo country by bringing alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, etc. Momaday observes: "Jemez is in a sense a late chapter in the history of White-Indian confrontation.... the age-old cultural conflict now centers upon the sedentary reservations of the south western United States". Such conflicts are vividly portrayed in *House Made of Dawn*. His mother foresaw the importance of education to preserve one's self from cracking-up. She insisted on her son learning English. He acquired a good command of English which stood him in good stead in his creative work. At the University of Virginia where he was a student in the faculty of law, he attended a meeting addressed by William Faulkner. He was impressed by Faulkner and wanted to write like him. He taught school on an Indian reservation for a year. During his free time he wrote and his writings attracted the attention of Yvor Winters, professor of English at Stanford University. He was awarded a fellowship for creative writing in poetry. This award changed the course of Momaday's life and career. His close association with Yvor Winters turned out to be a most rewarding experience which launched him as a creative writer. When he was at the University of New Mexico, he read D.H. Lawrence and Hart Crane; both of them left an indelible impression on him. In Crane's attempt to blend the mythic and the scientific in a poem like "The Bridge", Momaday saw a possibility for a harmonious relationship between the pastoral societies of the Indians and the technological society of America.

At Stanford University, Winters was a guide and adviser to Momaday. He taught him traditional English verse forms, post-symbolist method and the art of syllabic poetry. Winters's lectures on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens helped Momaday in forming his literary tastes. He obtained his doctorate from Stanford in 1963 for a dissertation on Frederick Goddard Tuckerman. He taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for six years. During this period, he wrote his novel, *House Made of Dawn* which won the coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1969. He also taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Stanford University. He teamed up with the well-known photographer David Muench, to produce *Colorado*. The beautiful photographs of Colorado landscape are introduced with lyrical text by Momaday who claims affinity with the Colorado landscape: "For my ancestors were native to the highlands of the continent.... A child who is born in the mountains has them forever in his mind. They bear upon the mind like a magnet. I have seen evidence of this in my own racial experience".

From writing commentaries to photographs, he moved to drawing. This happened during the spring semester, 1974, when he taught at the University of Moscow. From sketching he graduated to painting and etching. He won awards for his paintings. He is a rare combination of the best in the Indian and the American cultures. His mentor Yvor Winters has said of his prize pupil: "You are an Indian in the white man's world and are doubly isolated, but the fact gives you a remarkable point of view. But ... you are isolated by something else, and far more isolated: you are what the biologists call a mutation".

3.3 VERBAL UNIVERSE

We have seen in Unit 1 how important words are to the Native Americans who nourished a rich oral tradition for millenia. Word and breath are synonymous in the Native American imagination. Momaday subscribed to this essential tenet of his

culture. He wrote an essay, "The Man Made of Words", in which he explains his views on language which is the vital medium of a creative writer. In the context of the importance attached to words by the Native Americans and by Momaday himself it is useful, even essential, to examine Momaday's views on the verbal universe. Such an examination will enable us to understand Momaday better.

Momaday stated categorically: "we don't really begin... to exist until we convert ourselves into language". In several of his well-known works, he repeatedly makes the same point. Discovery of language, he claims in *The Names*, has enabled him to gain awareness of himself. He depicts the emergence of the Kiowas from the hollow log into the world through their naming themselves. The sixth section of *House Made of Dawn* is an essay on the results of lack of articulation. Abel, the central figure in this novel, fails to get "the right words". The final reality of existence in the Native culture is not physical, but linguistic, and this is shared by the tribe.

In Yvor Winters's words, Momaday's works are "forms of discovery". He attempts to explore his identity through his writings. In a significant statement Momaday says: "It seems to me that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension". He is more forthright on another occasion, "we are determined by our language; it holds the limits of our development. We cannot supercede it. We can exist within the development of language and not without. The more deeply we can become involved in language, the more fully we can exist". The two autobiographical narratives, *The Way to Rocky Mountains* and *The Names*, are his attempts at self-realization through the medium of language. In his prose works he grapples with the question, "who am I?" He seeks to reconcile his Indian heritage and contemporary American society. The Indian tradition keeps his traditions alive, and "works with in the verbal dimension". Momaday understood how language, reality and imagination are related by his research in the Kiowa oral tradition. His study of Emily Dickinson's poems gave him an insight into "the mystery and miracle of language". The power of language in promoting self-awareness may be noticed in Wallace Stevens's poems such as "Man Made of Words", and "The Idea of Order at Key West". In the first of these Stevens says:

The whole race is a poet that writes down
The eccentric propositions of its fate.

In the second poem, he says that the singer

Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and singing made.

Momaday explains in his essay, "The Man Made of Words": "Only when he [man] is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself". He compares the creation myths in the Indian and Christian traditions. Creation through the word is a common feature of several cultures. For the Kiowa woman in *House Made of Dawn*, "words were medicine, they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning". The Navajo Indians believe that "thought and speech can have a powerful impact on the world of matter and energy". This is contrary to the western view. As Gary Witherspoon puts it: "In the Navajo view of the world, language is not a mirror of reality; reality is a mirror of language". The Kiowa exists because of his name: "The name and the existence are indivisible. One has to live up to his name".

Native Indians who depend on oral literature laid great emphasis on songs, prayers, myths and legends, for giving vent to their imagination. Modern writers such as James Joyce also realized the importance of the verbal dimension. Joyce and Momaday consider human development as growing up to an awareness of language. The literary artist uses words and only words for the depiction of reality. Thus

language becomes reality. The verbal dimension assumes importance because it preserves ideas from annihilation or oblivion.

Nostalgia plays an important part in Momaday's work. The tradition of the Kiowa people on which he relies enables him to live in the presence of the past. Expressions like "blood memory" which appear frequently in his writings describe reality and provide a link to one's cultural identity.

Momaday did not know his grandfather who died two years before his birth. And yet he had heard stories about the old man. The power of language in the oral tradition is such that it is itself experience, not a narration of experience. Also, reality as presented through language is outside the Western concept of time measured by the clock. Such reality which is inseparable from the words has an immortal aspect to it.

Oral literature is living speech. When it is reduced to writing it loses its vitality. Momaday is aware of this: "when you translate the spoken to the written word, you freeze it, paralyze it. It loses something of its vitality and flexibility". In order to experience the inner vitality of a song or a story, the reader has to look upon words as events. Much of the vitality of language as a medium is lost in a passive reading of written texts. In Momaday's view, man's existence is ordered, controlled and preserved through language. The American Indians thought of language as creative and imperishable and as a vehicle for the continuance of human existence across time and space. Schubnell says that this idea is important for understanding Momaday's work in which "the dividing lines between reality and imagination, between past, present and future, and between individual and racial experience are blurred".

Momaday thinks that oral and written literatures are stages in an evolutionary process. He endeavored to blend both these. He finds support for his view in the work of great American writers like Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson: "the things which separate oral tradition and written tradition are more apparent than real, ... they can be virtually one and the same thing. That is, they can be informed by the same principles and they should be. I hope that's one of the things that will happen in time. We should be working to bring those traditions closer together than they are".

The study of oral tradition makes Momaday believe that life is a story, story is a real experience and a name is the concentration and preserver of personal being. In such a perception imagination is the ultimate form of existence. Momaday finds corroboration of his views in the work of Joyce, Proust, Dickinson, Stevens and others. He concludes: "man achieves the fullest realization of his humanity in such an art and product of the imagination as literature and here I use the term 'literature' in its broadest sense. This is admittedly a moral view of the question, but literature is itself a moral view, and it is a view of morality". These views of Momaday on the verbal dimension have special relevance because he described himself as a man made of words.

3.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND

The American Indians' deep attachment to land is briefly mentioned in Unit 1. They think that their land supports them not only physically, but even spiritually. Their understanding of the world is shaped by the mythology and history of their homelands. In Momaday's work also landscape has an important place. The varied landscape of the regions in which Momaday lived, deserts, canyons, plains, find crucial space in his writings. We cannot underestimate the cultural significance of land in an author who belongs to the Kiowa tribe.

House Made of Dawn presents a Native view of the land. *Colorado*, the photographic essay, includes many lyrical passages which recreate ancient myths about land, water,

and mountains. Momaday believes that land shapes an individual both physically and spiritually. The people in turn, relate to their land. The Indians consider it a sacred tie. Such a relationship offers a sense of belonging. They worshipped mountains, lakes, caves, etc. They see the land as a link between innumerable generations of the tribe. Their basic attitude towards Nature is one of living in harmony with it, not conquering it. This is in stark contrast to the attitude of later European colonizers. They offered prayers and accepted the land as a spiritual site which is at once the place of origin, source of sustenance, home of gods, of culture heroes, of ancestors. What is more, it is the same land which provides for and protects future generations. Momaday interprets the relationship of the Indians with the land as "reciprocal appropriation".

Momaday draws his inspiration for his commitment to the land and environment from his ancestors, but also from the voices of protest on the plundering and pillaging of America's natural resources. Perhaps it is proper to place him among the writers who celebrate the American wilderness in their writings. He expressed the opinion: "If there is anything that distinguishes American literature from European literature, it is that [American emphasis on land]". Momaday feels that man and land cannot be separated. He says: "the Indian conceives of himself in terms of the land. His imagination of himself is also and at once an imagination of the physical world from which he proceeds and to which he returns in the journey of his life. The landscape is his natural element; it is the only dimension in which his life is possible".

Momaday was influenced by a number of writers in his attitude to the land. Among them are William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence and Isak Dinesen, a Danish writer who lived in Africa for a long time and who was commended to Momaday by Yvor Winters. Both Faulkner and Momaday condemned the desecration of the American wilderness. Faulkner says "then came the Anglo-Saxon, the pioneer, ...turning the earth into a howling waste from which he would be the first to vanish... because ...only the wilderness could feed and nourish him". Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is also critical of the growing urbanization and encroachment on the wilderness. A related idea which is strongly embedded in Native American consciousness, as we have seen earlier is that the land (physical environment) shapes an individual. Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* was moulded by his environment: "He had grown to manhood in the country, where like the unswimming sailor his physical shape and his thought had been molded by its compulsions without his learning anything about its actual shape and feel". Momaday's *Francisco (House Made of Dawn)*, was also shaped by the land. Both Faulkner and Momaday plead for adapting oneself to the land, to the natural environment and for cultivating a code of honour.

Isak Dinesen writing about Africa also made a deep impression on Momaday. Dinesen's *Out of Africa* is rated as "one of the great books of our time" by Momaday. It has influenced his view of the relationship of land to man. Both the writers have made use of geographical environment to advantage; both are interested in the reciprocal relationship between land and man. Dinesen sees everything in Africa, its geography, its vegetation, its animals, and even its native people as expressions of the same theme: they are all Africa in flesh and blood. Momaday says: "The landscape is his [Indian's] natural element; it is the only element in which his life is possible". The relationship between man and his earth does not end with death as he returns to earth. The dead live in the soil, as it were.

Thoreau was another writer who made a fervent plea through his Walden experiment and his writings for striking a balance between wilderness and urban civilization: "In wilderness is the preservation of the world.I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows". The aboriginal people believe that the physical world is inhabited by spiritual beings. But Christianity does not believe in this. Consequently, in the Christian world, the bonds between man and earth, the individual and his natural environment are loosened. The growth of science

and technology has further jeopardized the faith of the ancient people in the reciprocal relationship between man and land. D.H. Lawrence, among others, felt that the devitalization of modern civilization was due to man's alienation from the natural environment. He says: "We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it off from its stem on the tree of life and expected to keep blooming in our civilized vase on the table". The title of Lawrence's essay on the subject of man-land relationship is "The Spirit of Place". Momaday also believes in the spirit of place. There is a "deep, aboriginal intelligence in the soil" which both creates and moulds cultures. This spirit of place provides valuable insights to several important characters in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. The land influences not only Indians, but the whites also. Reverence for the land can lead to a communion between man and the soil. Land also influences art. Momaday subscribes to this view: "The land itself seems to inspire artistic expression".

We find that in Momaday's depiction of the sexual relationship between Abel and Angela in his novel, he is in tune with Lawrence's own diagnosis of the malaise affecting modern civilization and his prescription to cure it, to revive a dying civilization. In both writers we observe a tension between a technology-based civilization and land-based, aboriginal culture. Both emphasize through their writings the need for harmony between man and land, and the reciprocal influences between these two.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we considered several factors which are crucial for the development of Momaday as a literary artist. We saw how his English education brought him into personal contact with important writers and how it provided him an opportunity to study other writers. We discussed the importance of the word in an oral literature such as the American Indian, and how language influences people. For Momaday who is a man made of words, the dividing line between oral and written traditions is rather thin. Next to language, the American Indian is shaped by the land, by his natural environment. We saw that this is a two-way relationship between man and land. We also discussed in this unit, some of the significant literary influences on Momaday. Among these are Thoreau, Faulkner, Dinesen and D.H. Lawrence, apart from the perennial Kiowa heritage. These writers are kindred spirits in their concern for land, for preserving the environment, for maintaining harmony between man and land.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Show how Momaday's education laid the foundation for his career as a writer.
2. Discuss the importance given to language in the American Indian scheme of things.
3. Comment on the reciprocal relationship between man and the land.
4. Compare Momaday's commitment to land and natural environment with that of Thoreau's and D.H. Lawrence's.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

The Making of
Momaday

Cassirer, Ernst: *Language and Myth*. Trans. Susanne K. Langer. New York: Dover, 1953.

Dinesen, Isak. *Out of Africa*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Momaday, N. Scott. *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

-----, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Press, 1969.

Schubnell, Matthias. *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.

UNIT 4 HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Structure
- 4.3 The Theme
- 4.4 Images and Symbols
- 4.5 Significance of the Title
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to analyze the various aspects or components of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. We shall attempt to know the structure, the theme, the characters before we consider interpretations and criticism.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The award of the Pulitzer Prize for Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1969 has a double significance. It is a recognition of "the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans." It is a tribute to a novel for its "eloquence and intensity of feeling, its freshness of vision and subject, its immediacy of theme." The novel grew out of a short story, "The Well," by the same author. Some of the characters and themes of the story are used again with refinements and elaborations in the novel. Alienation, violence, alcoholism, witchcraft and disintegration are themes which occur in both.

There is a perceptible autobiographical element in *House Made of Dawn*. The novelist's search for his roots may be observed in Tosamah's speech which deals with Kiowa history. The description of Jemez and Navajo cultures are based on the writer's personal experiences. Similarly, the landscape of the southwest and the way of life of the tribal people are important for the novelist. Witchcraft which he observed among Jemez people informs the novel. The depiction of witchcraft in the novel is only a recognition of a fact of life. Momaday says: "It is something which exists, it is part of the world we live in Everybody has a deep conviction that it exists." He had seen "runners after evil" who guard Jemez Pueblo against witches. Tosamah in the novel is like Momaday to a certain extent. Both are deeply interested in Kiowa history, language and the oral literature. Tosamah airs Momaday's views on several matters. Both have a fascination for words. The novelist's interest in Navajo culture is shown in several ways in the novel: the title of the novel, the symbolic healing, the Night Chant. The character, Benally, narrates Momaday's own experience of Navajo culture.

The novel portrays a crisis of identity for the Indians. Abel, the central figure of the novel, embodies this crisis. The Indian veterans of World War II found it difficult to re-enter the native cultures. Abel is unable to determine his place in his community and define himself. Each generation must seek its identity afresh. Momaday observes: "We are what we imagine.... Our best destiny is to imagine, at least completely, who

UNIT 4 HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Structure
- 4.3 The Theme
- 4.4 Images and Symbols
- 4.5 Significance of the Title
- 4.6 Let'Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to analyze the various aspects or components of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. We shall attempt to know the structure, the theme, the characters before we consider interpretations and criticism.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The award of the Pulitzer Prize for Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1969 has a double significance. It is a recognition of "the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans." It is a tribute to a novel for its "eloquence and intensity of feeling, its freshness of vision and subject, its immediacy of theme." The novel grew out of a short story, "The Well," by the same author. Some of the characters and themes of the story are used again with refinements and elaborations in the novel. Alienation, violence, alcoholism, witchcraft and disintegration are themes which occur in both.

There is a perceptible autobiographical element in *House Made of Dawn*. The novelist's search for his roots may be observed in Tosamah's speech which deals with Kiowa history. The description of Jemez and Navajo cultures are based on the writer's personal experiences. Similarly, the landscape of the southwest and the way of life of the tribal people are important for the novelist. Witchcraft which he observed among Jemez people informs the novel. The depiction of witchcraft in the novel is only a recognition of a fact of life. Momaday says: "It is something which exists, it is part of the world we live in Everybody has a deep conviction that it exists." He had seen "runners after evil" who guard Jemez Pueblo against witches. Tosamah in the novel is like Momaday to a certain extent. Both are deeply interested in Kiowa history, language and the oral literature. Tosamah airs Momaday's views on several matters. Both have a fascination for words. The novelist's interest in Navajo culture is shown in several ways in the novel: the title of the novel, the symbolic healing, the Night Chant. The character, Benally, narrates Momaday's own experience of Navajo culture.

The novel portrays a crisis of identity for the Indians. Abel, the central figure of the novel, embodies this crisis. The Indian veterans of World War II found it difficult to re-enter the native cultures. Abel is unable to determine his place in his community and define himself. Each generation must seek its identity afresh. Momaday observes: "We are what we imagine.... Our best destiny is to imagine, at least completely, who

When he re-establishes his relationship with his tribal culture, he is saved. In the novelist's own words, Abel "tries desperately to live in the present; yet he is hopelessly determined by the past." The novel is a strong plea for a search for identity and a realistic description of the forces which impede such a search.

4.2 THE STRUCTURE

The novel is enclosed between two Jemez formula words, *Dypaloh* and *Qtsedaba*, which are used for opening and closing a Native American story. Through this device, the novelist suggests that his novel has the potential of a tribal myth. The Prologue anticipates the closing and thus presents a circular structure. The novel, divided into four parts, is a complex and skillful juxtaposition of flashbacks.

Part I of the novel is located at Walatowa (Jemez) in July 1945. It has six sections each of which deals with selected events for a particular day. As Abel returns home after World War II his father Francisco rushes to meet him. Abel alights from the bus in a drunken state and falls into his grand father's arms. The resident priest, Father Olguin, and Angela Grace Martin St. John, a wealthy doctor's wife from Los Angeles, are also on hand. Angela has come to recoup her health. She is alienated from the land and her own body. She is attracted to Abel. During the feast of Santiago, the patron saint of Pueblo, Abel attempts to re-enter the community life, through a Chicken Pull. He appears without his uniform for that purpose. An albino pulls the rooster skillfully from the ground, drives Abel to a wall, beats him with the bloody chicken, and humiliates Abel. The same night, Fr. Olguin goes through the seventy-five-year old journal of Fray Nicolas. It shows the self-deception, self-righteousness, and presumption of the author. Abel realizes that although he wished "to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue... he was no longer attuned to it. [Abel was] not dumb - silence was the older and better part of custom still - but *inarticulate*." The events of part I climax in the feast of Porcingula on August 1. Francisco realizes the difficulty of playing the bull who chases boys pretending to be Spanish invaders during the feast. He finds it awkward to be a "a kind of victim, an object of ridicule and hatred." When the feast was over Abel murders the albino and escapes.

Six years later, Part 2, "The Priest of the Sun," begins. An image of grunion (food fish found off the California coast) is made on the California beach. Then the scene shifts to the basement church of John Big Bluff Tosomah who was the urban Indian trickster. He was the focus of a community of relocated Indians among whom were Abel and his Navajo friend, Ben Benally. The first section is subdivided into two. The first subsection begins with Tosomah's homily on St. John's gospel, "In the beginning was the word." The second sub-section presents Abel's flashbacks after he was brutally beaten by Martinez, the policeman, and as he rests on a cliff near the ocean. Abel's memories include the grunion, peyote services in the basement church, his trial for the murder of the albino, Fr. Olguin's defence that Abel had killed what appeared to him to be a witch, and the kindness of the social worker, Milly. He also sees Indians running, an intimation of the end. Abel who is totally alienated finds in the running and the image of the grunion some re-assurance to re-shape his future. The last section of Part 2 is an adaptation of Momaday's introduction to his own *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. He had to make this journey to recover his past as he was displaced from his roots. The "vision of deicide" and the Kiowa disaster at Palo Duro Canyon become sources not just of mourning but of rage."

Part 3 is entitled "The Night Chanter". It is told by Benally after Abel leaves for his home. This focuses on Abel's problems of adjustment to the city. Benally speaks of the inability of the Relocation program to compensate for important emotional and spiritual losses to enable the Indians to manage the transition to wage work and urban life. They prefer to find some sense of self and community in alcohol and Bow-wow

at night on a hill overlooking the city. The American Dream attracted them there and they are sorry now. Benally had to accept a menial job and live in a small tenement. The contrast between the idealised reservation and the reality of a harsh life is clear. Abel cannot stick to a job or keep friendly relations with Benally and Milly. He gets addicted to drink and goes into fits of rage. Benally promises to Abel a happy life on the reservation, a life without drink, a life when they can ride good horses in the mountains and sing old songs. More than Abel, Benally himself needs a dream like that because he has sworn to city life. Martinez, the sadistic cop, strikes Abel once again. Abel vows revenge. He regains consciousness after his confirmation with the cop. His hands are broken, his body is wrecked. After he was discharged from the hospital, he goes home by train.

Part 4 is entitled "The Dawn Runner" It contrasts Fr. Olguin engaged in a study of Fray Nicholas's old journals, and Abel, attending to his grandfather on his deathbed. The grandfather's incoherent sounds for the past six days make no sense to Abel. On the last night, Francisco narrates memories that are soothing to Abel. These memories refer to relations with women, the land, whites, his Kiowa community. At the end is the flashback of the running race, started "at a better man's pace" which had brought pain quickly. Francisco dies before dawn and Abel prepares the body for burial as per their tribal customs. He requests Fr. Olguin to bury the dead man and leaves suddenly. Then he daubs his body with ash at the outskirts of the village and joins a group of runners racing for rain and fertility in the new year. It rains at dawn and washes off Abel's ashes. He recalls Benally's prayer, "House Made of Dawn," from the Night Chant: "There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song."

4.3 THE THEME

The main theme of this novel seems to be the search for identity. This can be analyzed and understood from the story of Abel. He is caught between two opposing cultures and unable to come to terms with either. Abel seeks his identity in his own tribe before he faces modern American culture. Historically, his struggle for identity in his tribe is a crisis of a culture which refuses to allow any compromise amidst changing conditions. The older generation which resists change would not allow any accommodation to the younger generation which is eager to adapt to change. Abel finds it difficult to accept fully or adopt the customs of his culture. He moves away from his tribal culture and moves into modern American culture. He suffers from a confusion of identity. He does not belong in either of the culture fully. His personal relationships are unsatisfactory. He returns to his tribe hoping that the tribe would accept new values without sacrificing its traditional values. It is not only Abel who seeks identity, but the Indian tribes are also seeking their identity in the new situation brought on by the white man's culture. The people in Walatowa to which Abel also belongs are isolated in the canyon. So they are able to keep their languages, religions, customs largely intact. Abel grows up in such a society. Francisco in the novel is the preserver of the Pueblo culture. He is also a teacher who will pass on traditional wisdom to the next generation. He teaches Abel and Vidal, his grandsons, to observe the sun because most of their activities are guided by the sun. The sun and the land shape the rhythms of tribal life. Francisco's teaching impresses on Abel the crucial role of the environment. Abel participates in several activities of his tribe like herding sheep, hunting deer, and other ceremonies. But Abel feels like an outsider in his community. He did not know who his father was. With the death of his mother and brother he feels lonely. His grandfather, Francisco, domineers over him, controls his education and regulates his social contacts. Abel is unable to integrate fully into his community because of these circumstances. The conflict between a growing individual and unchanging tribal customs is also a conflict in Pueblo culture which is at the crossroads.

Abel finds that his grandfather's teachings are constraining; he must leave his tribe to find his identity. During his boyhood, he witnessed an eagle carrying a serpent in its talons. Both these creatures have religious significance for the Pueblo Indians. The serpent is the harbinger of water; it is worshipped by the Hopis in their snake dance. The eagle is endowed with supernatural powers on its flights. It is celebrated in the eagle dance. The eagle signifies freedom, beauty and life for Abel. He envies the freedom of the bird to soar high in the sky. Abel does not understand fully the deeper meaning of tribal rituals like, for instance, killing animals. It is not a snapping of the tie between man and animal if the killing is done as per traditional customs. His shame and disgust are due to his lack of understanding of the tribal culture. The failure of his grandfather's healing methods which include prayers, chants, herbs, powders, potions, etc., to cure his backache deepens Abel's distrust of the traditional ways. The chasm between the grandfather and the grandson widens. When Abel leaves his tribe he repudiates its rigid rules. Symbolic of his rejection of his native culture, he wears shoes as he moves away. The tribals' respect for land is such that they can wear shoes only if the heel is cut off, so that the sacred earth is not injured. Abel disregards this rule.

World War II in which Abel participated is another shattering event in his life. The de-humanization of this war is symbolized by the tank, or simply "the machine". The machine destroys life whereas the eagle of his adolescent experience stands for freedom and life. His fellow soldiers who are white refer to him as Indian and do not give him an individual status. In his community the rigid customs made him rebel; in the other world, the dehumanization and non-acceptance make him alienated.

On his return from the war, he finds it hard to re-enter the culture of his tribe. The game of the Chicken Pull illustrates Abel's inability to reclaim his lost faith. This ritual game was introduced by the Spaniards and adopted by several pueblo tribes who endowed it with their own ritual significance. In this game, the chicken is first buried in the ground and then pulled out, symbolizing the twin activities of planting and reaping. The scattering of the rooster's feathers and the spilling of its blood are a ritual enactment of the coming of rain. The tribes believe that this celebration would enhance the fertility of their land and ensure a good harvest. Abel fails at this ritual game, but the albino succeeds and torments him. Abel's failure is a measure of his estrangement from his native culture. His effort to re-enter that culture through his participation in the Chicken Pull proved disastrous. Abel gets a second chance in the Pecos Bull Dance to return to his culture. This dance offers catharsis of rebellious behaviour. Abel could have purged his aggressive tendencies in this ritual dance. Abel is reluctant to participate in the dance held on August 1. He may have several reasons for that. He is unable to identify himself with the tribal rituals; he does not have faith in the effectiveness of ritual dances. His failure in the Chicken Pull also dampens his enthusiasm to try a second time. It is also difficult for the upcoming young Indians like Abel to follow the old traditions. The pull of the old traditions and the counter-pull of the encroaching white culture create a crisis of identity for both individual Indians like Abel and for Indian cultures.

Abel's problem of identity is compounded by his handicap of loss of articulation. His return to his homeland and to his culture is impeded by his inability to speak: "Not dumb ---- silence was the older and better part of custom still ---- but *inarticulate*." The power of the word which is so vital and so sacred to the tribal cultures fails Abel at a crucial time. When the word is lost, culture and identity are lost. One's integrity or wholeness can be established only by the word. He regains his voice only at the Night Chant at the end of the novel.

Abel's problem of identity has another dimension, albeit a sexual one. After he fails to re-enter his culture through participation in its rituals, he seeks some stability in his relationship with Angela, a white woman. This also fails. This failure aggravates his isolation. He could not forge meaningful relationships in his younger days. He lost his parents and brother quite early in his life and did not have a sense of belonging to the community. Abel's lack of the power of words prevents him from establishing an

intimate rapport with Angela: "There he stood, dumb and docile at her pleasure, not knowing, she supposed, how even to take his leave."

Abel's identity crisis manifests itself in his inability to give vent to his aggressive tendencies properly. He directs his multiple failures against the albino and kills him. He is unable to understand the intricacies of witchcraft and so he reacts violently against the albino. The albino is his successful rival at the Chicken Pull. There is something strange in the albino. He is an Indian, but he is an outsider. Abel associates him with the evils of the world of the whites. The albino is believed to be a witch and an embodiment of evil. Abel's killing of the albino, is at once an act of self-defence and an attack on the corrupting forces of Anglo-American culture. This killing is a ritual killing of an evil force which is within his tribal cultural norms.

The albino is difficult to understand. Fray Nicolas's old journal says that he has historical precedents in the community. He stands for the impersonal and malicious power of the white race. He shares serpent-like qualities with Martinez, the cop. The latter is *culebra* or snake. More significance is attached to the albino. His death evokes references to Christ's passing. Before dying, the albino embraces Abel "in benediction" and "drew him in close, and the terrible strength of his hands was brought to bear only in proportion as Abel resisted them."

4.4 IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is rich in imagery and symbols. These devices are used to clarify the meaning in an impressive way. The fence is used as an image to reinforce the cultural and racial barriers which contribute to Abel's isolation. "There was a fence on the bank before him.... The fence was made of heavy wire mesh.... He raised himself to reach for the fence and the pain struck him again." The fence is a barrier between Abel and the white American society. Later, it is with the help of the fence that he lifts himself.

The setting of Abel's fight with Martinez is significant. He is "lying in a shallow depression in which there are weeds and small white stones and tufts of long grey grass." This is a feature of rituals related to initiation. The man is placed in a shallow grave from which he emerges a new person. Martinez's beating of Abel is the initiatory mutilations. The multiple injuries are symbolic death.

Water is another symbol. Abel lies on the beach, close to the sea. Water is source of life, of creation and fertility, Abel's association with water shows his estrangement and the possibility of rebirth in his tribal culture like the grunion (the small silver-sided fish off the California coast), Abel too is out of his element when he is cut off from his tribal roots. As the fish find their way back to the sea, so Abel returns to his community in the end.

The moon is a recurring symbol. It is connected with the sea and initiation rites. Abel realizes that the moon is a unifying and controlling force in the universe. He learns that the moon controls both the sea and the land. The moon and the sun are instruments for the tribes to mark the annual cycle for their activities. Momaday mentions that the moon influences the growth of plants. The moon is also a symbol of rebirth. In the Indian view of the universe, land and sea, man and animal, fish and bird are inter-related. As Abel becomes aware of this subtle relationship of all elements in the universe, he feels that he too has a place in the universe and he is tied with all other elements in the universe.

Dreams and vision are important in American Indian culture. They have almost a religious significance. Abel understands through his vision the significance of tribal

ritual. He realizes that the tribal elders use rituals to control the supernatural through his vision.

As Abel's understanding of the cosmic order improves, he realizes that his alienation from his community is the source of his loss of identity. Once the problem is identified, he is on the way to recovery. He knows that the Indian world of his youth is the place for a meaningful existence. With his understanding, Abel prepares to enter the tribal heritage through the Night Chant conducted by Benally. The Night Chant has healing power over Abel. It is one of a series of ritual activities which aid the regeneration of Abel. The others are the funeral rite for his grandfather and his participation in the ceremonial race at the end.

The Night Chant restores Abel's integrity which was disrupted by an alien culture. Indian ritual aims at integration of the individual with the environment. Abel regains physical and mental health and also the power of the word. The Night Chant says, "restore my body to me" and also "restore my mind to me". Thus physical and mental health of Abel are restored to him through ritual and song. "Restore my voice to me" gives Abel the power of the word he had lost on account of his estrangement from his community. The Night Chant also includes an entreaty: "Restore my feet for me. Restore my legs for me." That this prayer too is granted is borne out by Abel's participation in the race. We may recall that the power of motion is important for the Navajo.

4.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

Abel passes through the visionary, subconscious and ritualistic levels to the rational plane in his return to his community in Jemez. This recovery begins in his hallucinatory visions, aided by Benally's Night Chant, and continues after his return. His grandfather is on his deathbed for six days. He speaks of his memories during the dawn. Abel listens to Francisco; he fails to understand in the beginning. The dying man's voice was "whole and clear and growing like the dawn." As he grapples to grasp his grandfather's parting words, Abel remembers that the old man is talking of the solar calendar, of the ceremonial races and celebrations of Jemez, of the traditional hunting ways and rituals. Abel finally makes sense of the memories of his grandfather mumbled in the dawn; he recovers his faith in the ancient customs of his community. Then on the seventh day he conducts a ceremony and prepares for the funeral as per tradition. By doing so, he has assumed the mantle of Francisco, the medicine man.

Abel's return to his community also takes place just before dawn. There is a series of dawn images throughout the novel. Abel runs at dawn across the land at the beginning and at the end. After his struggle with Martinez, he lies on the beach; he awaits dawn, symbolically a rebirth. Dawn and the idea of creation are linked in Abel's attempt at a creation song: "He would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of dawn from the hills." The references to the first world, fire and flood are common to the creation myths of many Indian tribes like Hopi and Navajo. Dawn is the moment of emergence through flood or fire from the underworld. It is the beginning of tribal life, the beginning of tribal culture. Momaday stresses the importance of dawn. It is "the moment of invigoration, when new life awakens and all creation is astir --- it is creation itself, as 'in the beginning' From the dawn comes generation and birth."

The dawn image pattern suggests the migration of a tribe, its cultural crisis, and its potential rebirth: "then everything would be restored to an older age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn." *House Made of Dawn* deals with the cultural survival of a traditional tribe in the context of an encroaching alien culture. The tribe

requires strict adherence to its traditions; the pressure of the alien culture is strong. The resulting crisis leads to identity problems like in Abel's case. The Pueblos believed in the cyclical view of history and so there is another dawn for their tribe and its culture.

Abel performs his grandfather's funeral rites "a while... before the dawn." It is a moment of a new birth for Abel and also for his tribe. The Kiowa's migration from the north to the south and then to the east is truly "a journey towards the dawn." Abel is a dawn runner; his migration between the ancient and the modern worlds is a sign of a new era of Pueblo culture.

The cyclical structure of the novel appropriately fits in with the cyclical concept of time embedded in Indian myths. Abel returns after a circular journey to his community. He has recovered his faith in his tribe and its traditions. Momaday explains: "I see the novel as a circle. It ends where it begins and it's informed with a kind of thread that runs through it and holds everything together". The race is itself a symbol. It is a race for individual and tribal identity. The ceremonial race at the end is symbolic of Abel's reconciliation with his native culture and universe. In the novelist's words: "It is a long race, and it is neither won nor lost. It is an expression of the soul in the ancient terms of sheer physical exertion. To watch those runners is to know that they draw with every step some elemental power which resides at the core of the earth and which, for all our civilized ways, is lost upon us who have lost the art of going in the flow of things."

Abel runs at dawn. As he runs he sings the Night Chant; he has found his identity in his community. His place is in the house made of dawn. In the dawn over Jemez Valley, he "could see the canyons and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn." Abel appears as a link between the past and the future of his culture. Dawn is full of promise.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have analyzed the structure, the theme and the characters of the novel. We also attempted to explain the significance of the images and symbols used in the book. Finally, we figured out the meaning of the title of the novel. These are important and inter-related aspects of this novel.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the cyclical structure of *House Made of Dawn*.
2. Discuss Abel's identity conflict as the underlying theme of the novel.
3. What is the role of the albino in the novel?
4. Explain the significance of the imagery in the novel.
5. Justify the appropriateness of the title, *House Made of Dawn* by referring to the recurring dawn image.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Schubnell, Matthias. *N.Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.

Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981.

An Analysis

Wiget, Andrew. *Native American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

UNIT 5 CRITICAL PRESPECTIVES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Bildungsroman
- 5.3 The Biblical Myth
- 5.4 Momaday and Melville
- 5.5 Momaday and Faulkner
- 5.6 Momaday's Pessimism
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Suggested Readings

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 single enclosed system. The Indian culture and its

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.
- Larson, Charles R. *American Indian Fiction* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978.
- Schubnell, Matthias. *N.Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Velie, Alan R. *Four American Indian Literary Masters*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1981.
- Wiget, Andrew. *Native American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.