

## Language: An elixir for Native Americans: A close study of silent Indian (Abel) in Momaday's *house made of dawn*

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### Abstract

Oral tradition is an important aspect of Native American culture. It is the collective knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation. It helps in preserving tribes' history, culture, beliefs and sense of identity. There were no writer and reader but only a storyteller and a listener. Words do wonders for the Natives. So Native Americans had a great respect for language like they respected their land, elders and Nature. Language being so significant played a major role in the lives of Native people. Abel, the protagonist of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* thus suffered because of his inarticulateness. He remained away from his native world and didn't realize the importance of Native culture and significance of language. When he returned, he was unable to comprehend the native ways and was speechless at certain occasions. Because of his inexpressive attitude, he was almost a failure at every front of his life. This paper will explore the importance of language in Native American life by enlightening the difficulties the Indian protagonist face due to lack of speech.

**Keywords:** Oral tradition, Language, Word, Inexpressibility, Inarticulateness

### Introduction

In *Man Made of Words*, N Scott Momaday writes: "Oral tradition is the foundation of literature" (14). This single line elaborates the relevance of oral tradition in Native American literature. Oral tradition comprises of storytelling, eyewitness account, poems, visions, dreams and hallucinations. They all need words to be expressed and communicated among the other tribal members. Word and language hold an important place in Native American culture. But when the Whites intruded the simple world of the American Indians, their culture had been demolished. The old Indians remained attached to their customs and had a great respect for them but the younger generation didn't pay much heed to preserve their ethnicity and thus suffered. Abel, the protagonist of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* too suffered on this account. The distance from his land and culture made him so ineffable that he failed to live a prosperous life. In the land "where most culture doesn't exist until someone speaks, it very largely constituted by storytelling" (Kroeber 1). So in a culture like this, Abel is sure to face crisis because of lack of words.

*House made of Dawn* is simple yet mysterious and mirthful world of Native Americans, the land which is solemn and had benediction of their ancestors, the land where kinship was more important than progress, where elements of Nature give a healing touch, refreshment and rejuvenation to its denizens. This novel acquaints us with an estranged young man Abel who had just returned from the Second World War. Having a peep at the seven years of his life, the readers come to know about the tribulations faced by the Native Americans after Relocation, educational and religious policies of the government, internal conflicts between tribal people and most significant, the void between the old and the new generation which brought a kind of identity crisis for many young Native Americans, and Abel represents one such young man.

Abel's desolation started even when he was living with his family on his own land, his native village, Walatowa. The anonymous identity of his father made him and his family kind of outlanders on their own land as Abel "did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and Vidal somehow foreign and strange" (*HMD* 11). Still the family lived cheerfully with Grandfather Francisco. Then the deaths of his mother and brother brought lonesomeness for Abel and his nature changed from a gleeful child to a brooding young man. "Abel's inability to achieve true intimacy then can be seen as the result of the absence of meaningful relationships in his formative years. He grew up fatherless, lost his mother and brother in early childhood and never fully achieved an intimacy with the tribal community" (Schubnell 117). A child learns about his customs and rituals from his family and mostly from his mother and loss of mother was a great loss for Abel. Getting away from his indigenous customs made him a squatter in his own village and thus he became an isolated man.

The disturbing incidents at war and aloofness from his own land led Abel to take shelter of alcohol and in turn he turns into a distorted personality. When he returned from war, he was in a drunken condition. He doesn't even recognize his grandfather who had come to receive him at the bus stop. "In a world in which identity is derived from community, to not know his grandfather is dangerous" (Owens 97). Due to the Relocation policy of the government, Native Americans became devoid of not only their lands but they were left with scarred souls. The surly policies of the government; educational, religious or political brought affliction to the Native Americans. And Abel was also a victim of these policies and had completely detached himself from the cultural and ancestral roots.

Though Abel was somewhat relieved in the ambience of his

native land yet there was something missing, and he was unable to trace that missing factor. Many days have passed since he returned to the village but “nothing has yet passed between” Abel and his grandfather, there was “no word, no sign of recognition” (HMD 27). In fact he was incapable of expressing himself. He knew what he wanted to say but can’t say anything. He was feeling a kind of laconism. And this speechlessness took him away from his own land and people. In fact, the lack of affinity to his land and people had made him inexpressible. This was something which tormented him. Language is a sacred entity for Native Americans and Abel was inept to express his feelings into words, and this silence restricted his re-entry into his community. If Abel had envisaged the worth of his native world he should have known about the relevance of oral tradition. It would have helped Abel to confront the miseries of his life because oral tradition incorporates the native myths, traditions and also provides guidelines to the tribes. It is the heritage for the natives and children imbibe about their history from these stories. Abel being apart from his land and grandfather didn’t visualize the importance of oral tradition, and thus got entangled in odd situations.

Abel tried to re-enter into his native world by participating in the game of rooster-pull but here too he proved to be a failure. Defeat in the game made him more deserted and frigid. This frigidity can be seen in his sexual relationship with Angela, a White pregnant woman. His mute nature and split personality made him a failure in framing a new relation. In front of Angela, Abel “stood, dumb and docile at her pleasure, not knowing she supposed, how to take his leave” (HMD 31). Abel seemed confused when Angela “hoped that he might say something, too, anything of his own accord, it should have made everything so much easier. But he said nothing” (HMD 56). It was just a mechanical sexual encounter with no emotions. So, whether it be with Angela in the Benevides house or Milly in Los Angeles, there was no intimacy in both the cases because Abel was searching himself and a man with such broken self could rarely make a sturdy and warm bond with anyone.

Abel’s defeat in game led him to a heinous crime. He murdered a man who brought this defeat. But for Abel, this murder is a very simple thing for Abel as is visible in Abel’s one and only statement at the time of trial: “It was not a complicated thing after all, it was very simple. It was the most natural thing in the world. They must know that he would kill the white man again, if he had the chance, that there could be no hesitation whatsoever. a man kills such an enemy if he can” (HMD 91). The inadequacy to use the proper words, stuck Abel in deadly crisis. After the murder, he was speechless. He was unable to defend his act which according to him was just the eradication of an evil spirit. Father Olguin tried to justify his crime by saying that “I believe that this man was moved to do what he did by an act of the imagination so compelling as to be inconceivable to us” (HMD 90) but the white jury was incapable of understanding the silent language of imagination. So Abel’s silence was proving fatal to him.

The whites took advantage of Abel’s silence and “word by word these men were disposing of him in language, their language, and they were making a bad job of it” (HMD 90). They made shrewd use of words and proved him a culprit. Abel was thus imprisoned. Once again his inarticulateness and little knowledge of native ways had left him flabbergasted. He

didn’t not know the proper use of language which acted as a medicine for native people. A white man according to the priest “adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth. white man deals in words, and he deals easily, with grace and sleight of hand” (HMD 83) and they did the same with Abel. They molded the case according in their own way.

After his sentence was completed, he was sent to Los Angeles where Relocation people were going to take care of him. He met some good people like Ben Benally and Milly in Los Angeles. But his reticent attitude restricted him to make intimate relation with anyone. He somewhere dreaded attachments as he was unable to express himself. In Los Angeles, Abel was beaten by an evil policeman Martinez. After this deadly beating he had been lying on a beach. Here he had a vision of dawn runners. This vision was a positive sign for Abel. It means that his native land was calling him. He returned to his village where his grandfather was on the death-bed. Francisco tried to speak and pass the stories and experiences of his life to his grandson, but his voice remains feeble for six days, and it is on the dawn of the seventh day that his voice rose and his memory is clear. With this, the clouds of inexpressibility in Abel’s life also started scattering. The magic of oral tradition had worked and Abel was reconnected to his culture.

Abel’s association with his old grandfather brought him closer to his native world. In the end he started running like the dawn runners and suddenly he started singing, words are now returning to him. He starts singing “*House Made of Dawn, house made of dawn*” (HMD 185). The return of words revived his speech and initiated the process of his restoration to his own world. Abel was now pacified as all the afflictions are gone. His return to his ceremonial world restores his identity. He can express his feelings and his alienated self, his lost identity is restored. Frantz Fanon has described the power of language as: “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (9). So by getting the power of expressing, Abel got a new life. Language thus can do wonders.

Abel’s return to his Pueblo culture was completed with his acquisition of the ability to sing the life giving old native songs. He learnt to communicate in native language of Francisco and establishes a permanent relationship with oral ‘word’. Though he is attracted towards the American way of life but soon he realized the worth of his native culture. Through the medium of Abel’s emotional journey, the condition of many young Native Americans is enlightened and the way out is also suggested, ‘return to the native culture’. Language is the best way of expression. His inability to maintain relation with his grandfather, the ladies in his life or his dumbness at the time of trial, all was because of lack of proper words. Thus language or words acted as an elixir or life giving medicine for the Native Americans as it brought a new life for Abel.

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