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Abel's Identity Crisis and his Journey to his Native Self in 'House Made of Dawn': A Critical Analysis Perspective

[PP: 20-30]

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Abstract

The present paper investigates how Abel, the protagonist of *House Made of Dawn*, strives to establish a bond between his Native American heritage and himself. His troubles throughout his journey to belong to his culture have been depicted in the paper. The paper also discusses his failure to accommodate himself with his own culture as well as with modern life. His alcohol problem and communication problems, both with his grandfather and also with white men around him, have been shown as part of his entanglements. Attempt has also been made to investigate the transformations through which Abel is going in his journey to his native self and to his native cultural identity. Exploring the major crossroads in his life's struggle, and the sufferings through which Abel goes, the paper depicts how Abel rests and accommodates with his native culture after the death of his grandfather. As the novel portrays, very skillfully, the identity crisis of a Native American, the paper aims at exploring this search for identity and the struggles through which the protagonist of the novel passes in this crisis.

Keywords: Native American heritage, Momaday's novels, Identity crisis, Abel's journey, Native self

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1. Introduction

The studies on identity search and identity crisis have always been the focus of research for many scholars. The problem of identity crisis has been very particular with Native Americans and various studies (Wanyama, 2013) have attempted investigation into this. In line with this, the present study aims at investigating and critically discussing the problem of identity search of Native American protagonist of the novel- Abel focusing on the reasons of the detachment from culture and alienation from the heritage faced by him. As a part of the study, attempt has been made to introduce Momaday and his major works at the beginning of the study to give some background to the topic. The paper, then, focuses on the problem of alcoholism faced by the protagonist and his relationships and dealings with others around him. As a part of this, the relationship between Abel and his grandfather, and their first meet after Abel has done his service in World War II, is also discussed. His relation with a white woman, Angela, is also touched upon; and the white woman's perspective has also been depicted. Abel, in relation to traditional ceremony and a game, an albino man, whom he murders, his six years in prison, his struggle in adjusting his new life in Los Angeles, Ben, his Native American friend, Abel's worsening situation in this modern way of life, his going back to his grandfather's place, his grandfather's death and the change in Abel's life for better also form the important topics of discussion in this paper.

Offering such background, the paper explores how Abel feels stranger among his own people and how he cannot integrate himself into their rituals. His struggles and sufferings while attempting to incorporate in native culture and modern life, his search for his roots and , in the end, his successful journey, after various upheavals, to his native cultural self have also been discussed in the paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introducing Momaday

Navarre Scott Momaday was born on February 27, 1934, in Oklahoma to a writer/teacher mother and a painter/teacher father. As a novelist, a poet, a painter, and a professor having a Kiowa descent, N. Scott Momaday has shuffled between two cultures from an early age. Yet, he has managed to deal with this situation as an upside both in his life and in his works. This might be the reason why he is a unique writer. He has been familiar with the Kiowa oral tradition thanks to the tales which his father told him throughout his childhood. He came out as a highly successful writer of many books, and his literary career is full of prizes and achievements. His *House Made of Dawn*, his "classic first novel" (Momaday, 2010, p. 5), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. His some other major books, which followed it, include- *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), *Angle of Geese and Other Poems* (1974), *The Gourd Dancer* (1976), *The Ancient Child* (1989) and *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems* (1992). In his writings, Momaday has aimed at restoring the awareness of "spiritual life of the earth" (Momaday, 2010, p. 7).

2.2 Brief summary of *House Made of Dawn*

The novel consists of four sections and a prologue. It is not a straight narrative and requires a non-linear reading. Throughout the book, the narrative switches between present and past, modern life and traditional ways, and such techniques also show the identity confusion the protagonist- Abel experiences. Abel, a Native American, returns from his service in World War-II to his grandfather Francisco's place. Abel is introduced in the Prologue when he is running. His return to the reservation only strengthens his sense of alienation from his heritage. Soon after his coming back, he has an affair with a pregnant white woman and he kills an albino man, and whereupon he is jailed. After he is paroled, his life continues in Los Angeles where his situation worsens both because of his alcohol problems and due to some evil company around him. Besides his identity crisis, Abel suffers

physical pains too. He is beaten terribly. Soon after his recovering, he returns to his grandfather's place where he finds him dying. He performs the whole burial rituals. The novel ends with Abel's running again like in the Prologue.

2.3 Critical Analysis of *House Made of Dawn*

A Native American's dealing with alcohol is the major theme in the novel. A drunken Native American has been the stereotypical image of Native Americans for the white man. Moreover, as Warner (1984) remarks, "its use has developed into an emblem of the Indian's own destruction in the face of white civilization" (P. 15). As author further indicates, "liquor was seen to be the most effective agent in dissolving savage character" because whites thought that such a character "could not and would not be civilized" (Warner, 1984, P. 15). In *House Made of Dawn*, Abel, the protagonist, has serious problems with alcohol. Momaday (2010) depicts alcohol in many negative ways although he does not judge those taking refuge in alcohol. As Warner (1984) remarks, alcohol's "main function is a deeply alienating one, for it separates Abel from his heritage, and so from his own identity. Alcohol leads to physical and emotional weakness, disease and even death" (p. 21). The reader meets alcohol almost at the beginning of the book. When Abel returns from the war to the reservation, his grandfather Francisco sees a bus coming close:

He heard the sharp wheeze of the brakes as the big bus rolled to a stop in front of the gas pump, and only then did he give attention to it, as if it had taken him by surprise. The door swung open and he fell against his grandfather and did not know him. His wet lips hung loose and his eyes were half closed and rolling. Francisco's crippled leg nearly gave way. His good straw hat fell off and he braced himself against the weight of his grandson. Tears came to his eyes, and he knew only that he must laugh and turn away from the faces in the windows of the bus. (Momaday, 2010, p. 8)

Abel's drunkenness is of importance because he cannot recognize his grandfather. So, as Warner (1984) asserts, "it separates him from the grandfather who had raised him, and who is closely associated with Indian rituals" (p. 21). Alcohol also separates him from his friends and leads him to be exposed to humiliations many times. Most of Abel's troubles such as his inability to integrate with his own culture and his failure to be attuned to life neither in the reservation nor in Los Angeles are closely linked to his alcohol problem. Moreover, Abel's attempt to solve his identity crisis occurs firstly when he abandons alcohol.

3. Identity Crisis in *House Made of Dawn*

Identity crisis is described as a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Momaday's some other works also deal with identity confusion and a quest for Native identity. In his *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday takes a journey to his own Kiowa heritage and identity. The book is narrated in three voices. As Momaday (2010) states;

The first voice is the voice of my father, the ancestral voice, and the voice of the Kiowa oral tradition. The second is the voice of historical commentary. And the third is that of personal reminiscence, my own voice. There is a turning and returning of myth, history, and memoir throughout, a narrative wheel that is as sacred as language itself. (p. 14).

In *The Ancient Child*, Momaday (2010) portrays a boy, Set, who is raised away from the reservation and starts to be crushed between his two selves after "returning to tribal lands for the funeral of his grandmother" (p. 15). He turns into a bear in the end. This book is a "magical saga of one man's tormented search for his identity" (Momaday, 2010, p. 15).

Likewise in *House Made of Dawn*, Abel, experiences such an identity crisis and throughout this study his search of an identity related to his origins is dealt.

3.1 Introducing Abel- The Protagonist of the House Made of Dawn

Abel is the main character of the book. The novel starts in 1945 with Abel's return from the army to Walatowa where he was raised by his grandfather Francisco. Abel has grown up without any parents except Francisco. He has lost mother and his brother Vidal at an early age. It is also learnt that "he did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and Vidal somehow foreign and strange" (p. 11). This uncertainty of his father's roots haunts Abel all along. Abel is a man of few words. Moreover, he seems to be uncommunicative before the war. He is relocated in Los Angeles after he is released from prison, and his life there is narrated from his Native American friend Benally's perspective. Abel works there at a factory, and his life becomes more shattered. He cannot adapt to modern life and its expectations. Eventually he gives up. He quits job, and he cannot stay sober most of the time because of alcohol. He also cannot sustain his romantic relationship with a white social worker, Milly. He is beaten severely, whereupon he decides he does not belong to Los Angeles. He returns to the reservation when Francisco dies. Abel fulfills the burial procedures properly and this death brings a transforming change to in his journey to his heritage.

3.2 Abel's identity crisis/search and his journey to his native self

The following day, after his arrival to Walatowa, Abel thinks of his old memories with his brother Vidal and his mother, who have been dead for a long time. It is learned that he has not got to know his father, not even once. He also remembers hunting an eagle as a member of a society named The Eagle Watchers Society. He was still a child, then. They hunt eagle as a practice of their ritual. However, it seems there is something wrong with Abel:

He felt the great weight of the bird which he held in the sack. The dusk was fading quickly into night, and the others could not see that his eyes were filled with tears. That night, while others ate by the fire, he stole away to look at the great bird. He drew the sack open; the bird shivered, he thought, and drew itself up. Bound and helpless, his eagle seemed drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight. The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust. He took hold of its throat in the darkness and cut off its breath. (p. 20)

As Bartelt (2005) asserts, "rebellion against tribal sensibilities" appears "during Abel's adolescence...with his violation of a serious taboo, the mercy killing of an eagle caught for ritualistic purposes" (p. 471). A few days after Abel returns to the reservation he takes the job of chopping woods for a white woman, Angela Martin St. John. His way of cutting wood evokes sensual desires in her. She wants to have a sort of power over him. However, she is very offended in the face of Abel's indifference. He does not even bother himself to answer her questions about the wage. She is surprised and feels mortified: "His reserve was too much for her. She would have liked to throw him off balance, to startle and appall him, to make an obscene gesture, perhaps, or to say, 'How would you like a white woman?my painted fingers and my feet?' but it would have been of no use. She was certain that he would not even have been ashamed for her- or in the least surprised" (p. 31).

It seems that "Abel longs to integrate himself within traditional life" (Konevich, 2002, p. 237) after a longtime separation. Thus, he joins a game that takes place in his town. Some men including Abel are depicted on horseback because of this game. Those men enter the Middle and each rider, by turns, gallops to seize a rooster which is half buried in the ground. Abel cannot display a good show: "When it came Abel's turn, he made a poor showing, full

of caution and gesture. Angela despised him a little” (p. 38). Another competitor, the albino, who is “large and thickset, powerful and deliberate in his movements” (p. 38), skillfully grabs the rooster from the ground. After some time, the albino starts to hit Abel with the rooster in his hand until it dies: “Abel threw up his hands, but the great bird fell upon them and beat them down. Abel was not used to the game, and the white man was too strong and quick for him” (p. 39). Interestingly enough, this game is a part of Native American convention from which Abel seems detached, and it is outraced by a non-Native. The narrator lets reader know about how Abel feels after his return. He comes to his land only to find himself in a psychological struggle in feeling belonged to his Native self. He cannot speak to himself. He is utterly speechless, even within himself:

His return to the town had been a failure, for all his looking forward. He had tried in the days that followed to speak to his grandfather, but he could not say the things he wanted; he had wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, he was no longer attuned to it. [...] Not dumb-silence was the older and better part of custom still- but inarticulate. (p. 53).

Able, again, goes to Benevides house to cut off wood. Later on, the old man Francisco is described alone “among the rows of corn” (p. 58), and he senses the presence of evil, which foreshadows the forthcoming murder. Francisco has recognized that “evil plays as great a part in the circle of life as good” (Konevich, 2002, p. 237) unlike Abel who “is shut off from a comprehension of his tribe and the manner in which they view the world” (Konevich, 2002, p. 237). Such a discord between Abel and his grandfather, who has raised him, undermines Abel’s sense of belonging to his origin and leaves him alone in his struggle.

August 1st is the day of ritual. “The crippled old man”, presumably Francisco, “in leggings and white ceremonial trousers” (p. 67), seems to enjoy the spiritual atmosphere: “It made him glad to be in the midst of talk and celebration, to savor the rich belief of the coming rain upon the rows of beans and chilies and corn, to see the return of weather, of trade and reunion upon the town” (p. 68). He feels much attuned to each part of the ritual. He goes to shrine and kneel before Our Lady of the Angels. He performs every spiritual action with all his heart and soul. As a part of the ritual, a show with a horse and a bull takes place. While horse is regarded as a “beautiful, sensitive thing” (p. 70), bull is recognized as “a kind of a victim, an object of ridicule and hatred” (p. 71). Francisco easily relates the show to his experience. This show takes him back to the footrace in which he overtook Mariano. He also comes to acknowledge that he has been the bull several times. However, he believes that “it was done honorably and well” (p. 72), which indicates that Francisco, Abel’s grandfather, feels at ease about his past.

After the whole ritual, Abel and the albino man walk together. The conversation between them is not revealed. There has been a tension between the two since the rooster game even though they have had no argument. Abel ends up with killing the albino man. It seems there is not sound motive for Abel to commit murder. His killing the albino on a day of ritual should not be a coincidence since a ritual is a climax of Abel’s alienation from his heritage. As Konevich (2002) states, “Although the albino may be a symbolic representation of white culture, Abel does not kill him out of a sense of righteous vengeance, but rather as a result of his own disassociation from tribal customs” (p. 236). If he could speak out his feelings he would have told the albino high words to revenge his sense of otherness and disunity among his own people. As Bartelt (2005) suggests, the action of this murder becomes “symbolic of Abel’s attempt to resolve the cultural identity crisis which had plagued him since adolescence” (p. 473). He is unable to verbalize whatever he deals with inside. Therefore, this act of murdering might have been his unique way to break his numbness. He is now in another fight after World War-II in which he voluntarily fights with his fellow

soldiers for the good of their country. This time he is alone in his inner struggle, and there is no quick fix for him to accommodate himself to either his Native traditions and or life outside the reservation.

In the second chapter of the book, seven years have already passed since Abel was jailed. After his release, he is now in Los Angeles. Another character, Tosamah, "The Priest of the Sun" enters the scene with his sermon (p. 77). He talks about Kiowa myths and legends which he heard from his grandfather. The narrator turns to Abel's state of mind right after the spiritual sermon of the priest. As a stark contrast to this spiritual mood of the novel, Abel is depicted as someone who is out of place: "Why should Abel think of the fishes? He could not understand the sea; it was an enchanted thing, too, for it lay under the spell of the moon" (p. 87). Moreover, Abel's quietness from the beginning which is still prevalent is contrasted to Tosamah's focus on the Word: "There was only the dark infinity in which nothing was. And something happened. At the distance of a star something happened, and everything began. The Word did not come into being, but it was. It did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it" (p. 86). The first appearance of Abel in an urban and modern life after his release from prison is not favorable:

He was in pain. He had fallen down; that was it. He was lying face down on the ground, and it was cold and there was a roaring of the sea in his brain and there was a fog rolling in from the sea. The pain was very great, and his body throbbed with it; his mind rattled and shook, wobbling now out of a spin, and he could not open his eyes to see. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. When he awoke, he tried to move; he was numb with cold, but the effort to move brought new pain, sharp, then massive pain. It was so great that he fainted, and the next time he knew better than to move suddenly. The effect of the alcohol was wearing off. In another moment he began to retch, his whole body contracting, quaking involuntarily, and again the pain mounted and his mind was slipping away. He wanted to die. (p. 88-9).

As the novel unfolds, it is learned that he is lying on the beach. He does not know where he is and what he is doing. He can only feel the pain he is in. Later on, he starts to recall his experiences in pieces and thus letting reader know about what he has gone through after the murder. He thinks of the trial. However, he cannot remember much. "There were charges, questions, and answers; it was ceremonial, orderly, civilized, and it had almost nothing to do with him" (p. 89). Father Olguin seems to understand Abel when he defends him in the trial: "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" (p. 90). Abel, in the mean time, remains silent: "When he had told his story once, simply, Abel refused to speak. He sat like a rock in his chair, and after a while no one expected or even wanted him to speak (p. 90). As he continues recalling, his line of thought is "abruptly interrupted by a shift in register" (Bartelt, 2005, p. 469):

Age and date of birth:

Sex:

Height:

Weight:

[...]

Education (circle appropriate completed years of schooling):

Father's name (age and occupation if living):

Mother's name (age and occupation if living): (p. 92).

As Bartelt (2005) claims, "the register switch" above "makes an intertextual reference to the cold and impersonal genre of official information forms" (p. 470). He also states that

the questionnaire listing a number of biographical questions is “designed to strip him of his individuality” (470). As Foucault proposes, this form underlines “surveillance over his every move” (Bartelt, 2005, p. 470). Such questions will possibly cause Abel to have some difficulty “in responding to some of the prompts.” (Bartelt, 2005, p. 470). Bartelt (2005) exemplifies this claim by pointing out that “his father was unknown to him and may have even been a ‘foreigner’ from another tribe, an officially ignored ‘fact’ which may actually have been part of the original ‘trouble’ in Abel’s life story. In his early childhood, he has felt like an outlandish even in his Native community. This adds another dimension to his difficulty in his demand for identification of himself. As Erikson alleges, “without having achieved a well-developed sense of self in adolescence, the adult will be capable of only highly stereotyped interpersonal relations that tend to intensify his sense of isolation” (cited in Bartelt, 2005, p. 472). It is most likely the Abel’s case. However, it is almost impossible for Abel to detect what his problem is: “He tried to think where the trouble had begun, what the trouble was. There was trouble; he could admit that to himself, but he had no real insight into his own situation. Maybe, certainly, that was the trouble; but he had no way of knowing. He wanted a drink; he wanted to be drunk” (p. 93). Then, Milly comes along. She is one of those who are meant to be instrumental to improve Native Americans’ lives. She occasionally brings questionnaires to Abel:

“No test is completely valid,” she said. “Some are more valid than others.”

But Milly believed in tests, questions and answers, words on paper. She was a lot like Ben. She believed in Honor, Industry, the Second Chance, the Brotherhood of Man, the American Dream, and him- Abel; she believed in him. After a while he began to suspect as much, and... (p. 94).

However, in his new modern environment, “assessment instruments” seem to “exacerbate Abel’s sense of cultural estrangement and isolation” (Bartelt, 2005, p. 475). After some reminiscences he has thought of, he wants to pull himself together: “He had to get up. He would die of exposure unless he got up. His legs were all right; at least his legs were not broken. He brought one of his knees forward, then the other, and he managed to get to the fence.” (p. 110). When he stops to rest, his mind again shifts back to old days. He imagines Milly and Ben coming towards him on the beach. In the third part of the book, Ben narrates. Throughout his narration, it is easy to see his sincerity towards Abel. He really wants to help him settle into this modern life. Unlike Abel, Ben seems to have found a compromise between his traditional ways and modern life he is now in. He remembers one night when he, Abel, and his some other friends met up: “I started to sing all by myself. The others were singing, too, but it was the wrong kind of thing, and I wanted to pray. I didn’t want them to hear me, because they were having a good time, and I was ashamed, I guess. I kept it down because I didn’t want anybody but him to hear it” (p. 129). As is understood from this excerpt, he has been holding on to his heritage. He has not completely silenced that part of himself even though he is ashamed that others might hear when he prays. This embarrassment must be because he is afraid that others would not understand this spirituality. That is why, he only wants Abel to hear him pray: “House made of dawn, house made of evening light, house made of dark cloud, house made of male rain, house made of dark mist.” (p. 129). His narration, sometimes, drifts into his mind. For readers, it becomes possible to feel as an intruder in his mind. He inserts some stories and songs into his telling. He mentions a plan that he has made up to tell Abel when he is in the hospital. They would get drunk and sing the old songs. Ben speaks to him of “those old ways, the stories and the sings” (p. 129). He tells him what he thinks about what they mean, which indicates that the connection between him and his culture is active. Abel listens to him enthusiastically and he believes this fake plan and asks questions about details.

That Abel gets excited about being drunk in company with their stories and songs might suggest silver lining to come out. Abel and Ben have grown up in the reservation. As a reader, it is hard not to make a comparison between the two. They, now, are in a battle of self-expression and of finding a way of being in step with their changing environment. It seems Ben has not as great difficulty as Abel in achieving this. He accounts for Abel's deterioration over time from his point of view: "But he was unlucky. [...] And it would have gone all right after that, too, if they had just let him alone. The parole officer, and welfare, and the Relocation people kept coming. They were always warning him, you know? Telling him how he had to stay out of trouble, or else he was going to wind up in prison again (p. 139). As Ben implies, Abel would have recovered had he not been constantly disrupted and controlled by "the parole officers" or "the Relocation people" (p. 139). He also believes that those people might be the reason of Abel's getting muter: "And they can't help you because you don't know how to talk to them. They have a lot of words, and you know they mean something, but you don't know what, and your own words are no good because they're not the same; they're different and they're the only words you've got" (p. 139). Ben feels that "he was getting all mixed up" (p. 140) because of people around him. He recalls when everything has been too much for Abel. It is when Tosamah talks about the reservation- which is a sore issue for Abel. He gets mad: "It was like everything just exploded inside of him, and he jumped up from the table and started for Tosamah. But he was crazy drunk, and he couldn't stay on his feet. He stumbled backward and fell against the sink" (p. 141). Ben states that Abel becomes worse after this incident. He stops going to work for some time. More importantly, he becomes a best friend of alcohol. He, most of the time, fools around as drunk. When he runs out of money he beats Ben to give him money. Later on, he starts to do the same to Milly: "Pretty soon I wouldn't give him any more, but you know what he did? He started asking Milly for money. He would tell her he needed some new clothes, or bus fare to look for a job or something, and she would give him two or three dollars, sometimes five, every time" (p. 143).

Milly worries about Abel a great deal. He simply cannot hold on to any job. The Relocation people find him several jobs. However, he is fired since he is drunk most of the time. For some of those jobs he does not even show up. Milly is always good to him and Ben. Therefore, Ben is afraid that Abel might offend her: "he would make jokes and say things about her sometimes, and I laughed all right, but I didn't like it much, because I thought a lot of her and she was good to us. I never said anything when he talked like that. [...] She liked him better than me, I think, and I was always afraid that he might hurt her somehow" (p. 143). These times are still their good times together. However, one night when Ben and Abel are coming home from a friend of theirs they encounter a villain police officer, Martinez. He crosses their path with a stick in his hand. Ben is scared since he feels that something bad will happen:

Pretty soon, 'Hello' he said. 'Who is your friend, Benally?' And he stepped in front of him and held the light up to his face. I told him his name and said he was out of work; he was looking for a job and didn't have any money. Martinez told him to hold out his hands, and he did, slowly, like maybe he wasn't going to at first, with the palms up. I could see his hands in the light and they were open and almost steady. 'Turn them over,' Martinez said, and he was looking at them and they were almost steady. Then suddenly the light jumped and he brought the stick down hard and fast. (p. 153).

Ben sees him "doubled up with pain" (p. 153). His hands are swollen badly although they are not broken. However, he cannot protest. He simply cannot say anything just like the incident in which he could not argue against Tosamah. Ben believes that this event is the final

straw for Abel. From this day on, he is drunk all the time. He stops looking for a job: “The liquor didn’t seem to make any difference; he was just the same, sitting around and looking down like he hated everything, like he hated himself and hated being drunk and hated Milly and me, and I couldn’t talk to him” (p. 160). They have an argument eventually. Ben feels that he cannot take him anymore. He tells him how he is fed up with thinking about him and his life. Abel is enraged and leaves Ben’s place. Later on, Ben regrets what he said to Abel. Abel does not appear for three days. While Ben feels, in a way, relieved that he is not around: “I kept telling myself that maybe it was a good thing, him going out by himself like that. He was drunk and sick, you know, and he couldn’t get very far” (p. 161). He cannot help thinking about Abel: “I figured maybe he had been picked up and thrown in jail, maybe they could see that he was sick and they would get a doctor to take care of him. [...] He would be there when I got home, and we would straighten everything out” (p. 161).

3.3 Abel’s return to his native self

Three days later, when Ben wakes up to some noises at the door, he sees a body which is half dead. After Abel recovers, he leaves for his home. Ben says that he wanted to pray for Abel. They go together on horseback to the hill and Ben retells what they will do once they meet again: “We were going to be all alone, and we were going to get drunk and sing” (p. 166). To some extent, he finishes his narration in a reassuring tone. In the following section of the novel, Abel is at home with his grandfather Francisco, and Francisco is on his deathbed: “He had shivered all morning and complained of the cold. [...] He revived in the dawn, and he knew who Abel was, and he talked and sang. But each day his voice had grown weaker, until now it was scarcely audible and the words fell together and made no sense” (p. 171). Abel is taking care of him. While he lies sick, Francisco’s life flashes before his eyes, as the phrase goes. He remembers some of the most unforgettable times of his life. One of them is about a race which Francisco takes both his grandsons, Abel and Vidal, to a spot where they can hear the runners. The race Francisco mentions is a ritualistic one. This memory flooding back foreshadows a funeral of Francisco’s. The following day, he wakes up and feels that his grandfather is dead. He gets up and he does not seem anxious as if he has already braced himself for this death. He knows what he is supposed to do:

“He drew the old man’s head erect and laid water to the hair. He fashioned the long white hair in a queue and wound it around with yarn. He dressed the body in bright ceremonial colors. [...] He wrapped the body in a blanket.” (p. 183).

He does the whole burial procession in accordance with their tradition. That “Abel at last knows what he must do” (Woodard, 1978, P. 28), and he carries every detail out in a proper way comes as surprise. It is understood that he has been, actually, keeping traditionalist ways somewhere inside and waiting for the right time for him. He does not wait for the dawn to break. He immediately goes to Father Olguin’s place to let him know:

“What in God’s name-?” he said.

“My grandfather is dead,” Abel said. “You must bury him.”

“Dead? Oh...yes-yes, of course. But, good heavens, couldn’t you have waited until-”

“My grandfather is dead,” Abel repeated. His voice was low and even. There was no emotion, nothing.

“Yes, yes. I heard you,” said the priest, rubbing his good eye. “Good Lord, what time is it, anyway? Do you know what time is it? I can understand how you must feel, but-” (p. 184).

After stopping by at Father Olguin’s place he does not go back to Francisco’s house. But he “instead runs a ritual race formerly performed by his grandfather, a race for hunting

and harvests” (Warner, 1984, p. 25). As Clements (1982) states, “after years of estrangement from his native culture and several futile attempts to come to terms with evil on an individual basis, a technique more characteristic of white than Jemez culture” Abel runs in this “ritual race” (p. 60). He must be now in the “dark wilderness” which is described at the very beginning of the novel, which indicates that he starts to run and continues running up until the very end. He lets himself into the nature to express himself. He is alone when he begins to run, yet he is not depicted alone in the end. I believe, as Woodard (1978) alleges, Abel achieves “the ultimate ‘act of imagination’ by going alone into the dawn and imagining the other runners” (p. 28). While running, Abel starts to mumble a song: “He was running, and under his breath he began to sing. 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. House made of pollen, house made of dawn” (p. 185). Whether he sings out loud or he sings inside is not of significance here. What is important is that Abel sings “only when he is sober” (Warner 1984, P. 26). He is not drunk as he has always been. As Warner (1984) claims, “the act of singing is set up in implicit opposition to everything that conflicts with that tradition: the passivity of reservation life, increasing secularism, white exploitation, and, not least in importance, alcoholism” (p. 26).

Abel's singing and running might be signs of, as Warner (1984) purports, “Abel's reunion with the land and with the artistic and religious parts of his culture” (p. 26). It can also be interpreted as his “reintegration into the Pueblo way of life” (Clements, 1982, p. 60). Throughout the novel Abel has been experiencing a serious identity crisis. However, the end signifies a fresh start. There is an obvious progress in his struggle, which will resolve his complexity. It is “when he learns not to forget but rather to remember who he is- a Tanoan/Navajo Indian, the grandson of Francisco the farmer” (Warner, 1984, p. 23). His eventual abandonment of alcohol is a first step. As Warner (1984) notes, Abel undergoes a change “from levels of confusion and drunkenness to a new understanding of self and heritage that is marked by a traditional art form: a song” (p. 26). Running a ritual race and singing are other noteworthy components of this progress.

4. Sum Up

In this study, Abel's search for his identity was investigated. Attempt was done to elaborate on Abel's life and his floundering in holding on to his Native American identity. The paper also attempted to show how Abel felt stranger among his own people and how he could not integrate himself into their rituals. It is noticed that his grandfather's death opens a new page in Abel's life. In the end, he achieves a sense of Native self. Abel's running and singing has been inferred as his fundamental progress on the way to recover his Native identity. The running into nature and singing signify his coming to embrace his Native culture. To conclude, Abel search for identity and his struggles and conflits within, in some way or other are also the typical experiences of native american writers like Momaday.

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