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## UNIT 3 THE MAKING OF MOMADAY

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### 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

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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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*.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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**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.

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### 3.2 EDUCATION

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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

*A House Made of Dawn*

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".

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### 3.3 VERBAL UNIVERSE

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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.

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### 3.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND

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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.

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#### 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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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.

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#### 3.6 QUESTIONS

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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.

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3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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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.

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## UNIT 4 HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: AN ANALYSIS

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### 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

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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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.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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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