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THE THEME OF INDIAN IDENTITY IN "THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN" BY SCOTT MOMADAY

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Annotation: The article deals with the theme of identity in American literature of the XX century. The search for Indian identity has become one of the themes that is addressed in the novels of Scott Momaday. The writer's creative approach to describing the theme is analyzed in the selected work of Scott Momaday.

Key words: native American, contemporary, theme, identity, word, language, myths, folklore, imagination

In the XX century American literature was enriched by the novels on various themes written by writers of different nationalities. In their books they raised issues, beliefs values that worried them. One of the themes that could be observed in American literature deals with "the search for identity." In the history of American literature writers created literary characters left their family, ancestry, and the past to head west. This way the writers made an attempt to create a national "American identity" in their novels and stories. This approach in literature developed another theme that deals with national consciousness that was being forgotten due to American identity. According to Clausen D.M studies have demonstrated that Americans, more than ever before, are researching their ancestral connections as they sense that their national identity and values have changed significantly during their own lifetimes. They want—indeed, desperately need—to be more grounded in a continuance of ancestral connections[1].

This article will illustrate how the theme of identity is presented in "The Way to Rainy Mountain" (1969) written by modern American writer N. Scott Momaday. The writer raised and explored the theme of identity in many of his essays, lectures, poetry and fiction. In his book "The Way to Rainy Mountain" Scott Momaday blends history, folklore and his poetic memoir to discover his Kiowa background and identity. The structure of the book makes it different from other novels of Scott Momaday. The writer takes the reader to the journey in which three separate voices are heard: the first voice, the ancestral voice, tells about the Kiowa by using oral traditions and myths; the second voice is a historical commentary; and finally, the third voice is Momaday's poetic memoir of his experiences. All three voices together teach about the Kiowa's origin, beliefs, traditions, morals, and conflicts. For its creative approach in presenting the national identity, the book brought Scott Momaday the National Medal of Arts in 2007 for his celebration and preservation of indigenous oral and art tradition.

In his novels Scott Momaday questions Indian identity and asks "What is an American Indian?" and the author's response is "The answer of course is that an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself"[2]. In his collection of essays and stories "The Man Made of Words" the writer commented on the theme of identity and stated that "it is a moral idea, for it accounts for the

[1] Psychology Today (2018, August 16). The Search for Identity in American Literature and Life by Clausen D.M. The Search for Identity in American Literature and Life | Psychology Today

[2] Momaday, N. Scott. "The Man Made of Words." Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars. Ed. Rupert Costo. San Francisco: Indian Historian, 1970. p.49

way in which he reacts to other men and to the world in general. And that idea, in order to be realized completely, has to be expressed"[3].

In the prologue of "The Way to Rainy Mountain" Scott Momaday presents his philosophy of identity and describes the formation of how the Kiowa tribe survived while moving to Rainy Mountain. By focusing on the "the history of an idea, man's idea of himself", Scott Momaday states that "it has old and essential being in language"[4]. The writer strongly believes in the imaginations of Kiowa tribe people and translates their old ways by keeping their authenticity in terms of language and idea. For the writer "words contain the remembered past, names lie at the heart of ritual language and put human beings in touch with the spirits of heaven and earth"[5]. His another approach to preserving values and memories is demonstrated in his treatment of Kiowa tribal groups in the old Indian way. The writer selects stories that help determine Indian identity that present their beliefs and customs of traditions.

Scott Momaday's interest in the search of identity has its roots in understanding who his parents were. In his autobiographical work "The Names", Scott Momaday characterizes his mother: "She began to see herself as an Indian. That dim native heritage became a fascination and a cause for her … She imagined who she was. This act of imagination was, I believe, among the most important events of my mother's life, as later the same essential act was to be among the most important of my own"[6]. The writer's biographer M. Schubnell in his book states the reasons of what caused Scott Momaday to search for his father's Indian heritage and concludes that the writer found his roots of his heritage and thus he acquired his own Indian identity.

According to anthropologist M. Wax "Indians maintain their status by a forceful act of will in the face of pressure and hostility, both from within and without the Indian world"[7]. For Scott Momaday this forceful act serves as an act of the imagination and illustrates the process in "The Way to Rainy Mountain", that addresses issues of identity formation, cultural identity, alienation, and cultural relativity. Due to his valuable learning that he gained in the process of searching for his Indian identity, the writer claims that "Indian identity is an imaginative interaction of American Indians with their tribal heritages". In the prologue to "The Way to Rainy Mountain", Scott Momaday stresses that "the imaginative experience and the history express equally the tradition of man's reality"[8].

In the expression of his Indian identity Scott Momaday also realizes and identifies the important role of language in the imaginative interaction. In his essay "The Man Made of Words" Scott Momaday focuses on the importance of language and states "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"[9]. In the context of "The Way to Rainy Mountain", language plays two different functions. In examining stories from Kiowa tradition, Scott Momaday can imagine what it means to be Kiowa from a historical standpoint. In writing the book he completes the notion that "an Indian is an idea a given man has of himself. And it is a

[3] Ibid., p.74
[4] Momaday, N. Scott. The Way to Rainy Mountain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969. p.65
[5] Ibid., p.71
[6] Schubnell, Matthias. N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. p.15
[7] Wax, Murray L. Indian Americans: unity and Diversity. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1971. p.173
[8] Momaday, N. Scott. The Way to Rainy Mountain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969. p.4
[9] Momaday, N. Scott. "The Man Made of Words." Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars. Ed. Rupert Costo. San Francisco: Indian Historian, 1970. p.162

moral idea, for it accounts for the way in which he reacts to other men and the world in general. And that idea, in order to be realized completely, has to be expressed"[10].

The structure of the book presents the writer's creative approach to illustrate the richness Kiowa folklore. As "The Way to Rainy Mountain" is a collection of Kiowa tales that includes stories with historical accounts and personal memories, the book's multi-leveled voice narration suggests different view about the book's complexity. Together with his journey to his Indian identity by analyzing Indian myths, history, and family stories and legends, he found and identified his own identity: "A Kiowa man raised in Pueblo culture, Scott Momaday was educated in both Indian and white schools. He has imagined his worlds with permeable boundaries that allow freedom of movement"[11].

In the process of searching for Indian identity, Scott Momaday clarifies concepts and themes that are important for understanding Indian identity. Those concepts underlie spiritual attachment of Indians to the land and their interrelationship with all things in the nature. American critic S. Larson states that the notion "place" is imagined in Indian culture and writings often conflicts with ideas of land held by others. For example, there is considerable difference between Indian ideas of place and European notions of property. Native American figures of place depart significantly from the figures that were established in Europe"[12]. The following citation from "The Way to Rainy Mountain" illustrates this difference:

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[13].

For Indians the land is not something that could be bought and sold, divided and conquered, but it is an entity with which they exist together. In their imagination the earth nurtures them and as their history is associated with specific places, Indians attach a strong sense of sacredness to these places. In "The Way to Rainy Mountain" Momaday develops this, "*All things in the plain are isolate; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but one hill or one man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where creation was begun"*[14].

The Indians' relationship with the land implies the idea of how a person's health can be depended on nature, especially land that demands a horizon, and that horizon is the land, or "place." Life is built in regard to the places where it is a lived—place, walking base to which the events of life are illustrated. Scott Momaday have called this a "sense of place," which comes from "the perception of a culturally imposed symbolic order on a particular physical topography".

"The Way to Rainy Mountain" describes the images of the created cultural landscape. The book narrates a Kiowa journey that resembles the early life stories of other tribes, that gives the vision of peaceful life where landscape plays a crucial role. This vision demonstrates tribal view of Indian identity which reflects Momaday's belief that preservation of tribal heritage is imaginative and the survival of tribal identity is due to this imagination for contemporary American Indians. In his book "The Way to Rainy Mountain", Scott Momaday not only explores his tribal Indian identity, but also by investigating he contributes to its preservation.

[10] Momaday, N. Scott. The Way to Rainy Mountain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969. p.162
[11] Ibid., p.8
[12] Larson, C.R. American Indian Fiction. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978. p.51
[13] Momaday, N. Scott. The Way to Rainy Mountain. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969. p.83
[14] Ibid., p.5

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