

# Struggling between Bi-cultural Worlds —The Protagonist's Personality Structure in House Made of Dawn

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**ABSTRACT.** *House Made of Dawn*, the masterpiece of the Native American Writer N. Scott Momaday published in 1968, won him fame and recognition in dominant American society. The thesis analyzes Abel's ego in the frustration, desperation and pain in trying to assimilate into the modern society. His isolation in Indian culture resulting from the environment and experience and bi-cultural dilemma leads him to frustration and he feels that he never has any sort of appropriate identity. The frustration and pain he undergoes disillusion him but wind him up the way to return to his own culture. His ego fails to adapt to the modern society but may find its way in his original place. It is the ancient Indian tradition that arouses Abel's racial awareness and releases him from the confusion and frustration.

**KEYWORDS:** *House Made of Dawn; Abel; Ego*

## 1. Introduction

According to Freud, the ego is involved with the perception of reality and the adaptation to reality. It functions as the executant of the id and as a mediator between the id and the superego. Abel's ego implements his id that wants to assimilate into the modern society and struggles to meet the need of it. The ego is greatly affected and developed by his surroundings. However, his ego has to undergo frustration and desperation on account of the reality and endeavors to adapt to the reality. Under the guidance of his superego, his ego begins to function as the mediator coping with the contradiction between his id and superego.

## 2. Feeling Isolated in the Tribal Culture

Terry Eagleton stated in his *Literary Theory* that "Ego or individual identity is a specially designed position among various networks that concern gender, family and society" (Terry Eagleton *Literary Theory* 155). The ego consists of the functions which have to do with the individual's relation to his environment. The surroundings

and experiences serve as vital factors for the development of ego. As far as Abel is concerned, his family and the experience during the war cause his otherness in his culture.

Abel's mother dies young. In accordance with the living patterns of his tribal tradition he grows up under custody of his grandfather Francisco. Abel is involved in the tribal life—he hunts eagles and takes part in the activities of the Pueblo. Regardless of being superficial tuneful with the Pueblo, Abel still lives in estrangement with his hometown. “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” (11). Therefore he is born with a position as an alien. What makes things worse is the early death of his mother and brother Vidal, which leads to more serious feeling of isolation in him. Living in the state of lack of family ties gradually obstructs his assimilation into his tribe. With Abel's growing up he locates himself nowhere in the tribe and senses his otherness in Pueblo. It is by viewing the eagle's flying in the sky high above the plateau that he considers the eagle as the symbol of freedom and realizes the restriction from his tribe. During the time he participates in eagle hunt, they catch an eagle and keep it in captivity, yet he feels no pride or victorious but sad: “The sight of it filled him with shame and disgust. He took hold of its throat in the darkness and cut off its breath” (20). His killing, as a matter of fact, makes up an action rebelling against his tribe culture and tradition. There is more than one piece of evidence that show his different psyche responding to killing animals from that of the tribal custom. He finds it by no means easy to be under the guidance of Francisco and live in harmony with Indian tradition so that he is determined to flee away from Pueblo community. His ego affected and designed by his family and environment prevails in his mind and he makes a step to depart from the village being an outsider.

After his return from the war, his isolation has proliferated by his appearance in the bus stop in the first chapter—he is too drunk to make out his grandfather. He intends to gain freedom by escaping from his tribe and integrating into the modern society, whereas he is not able to completely get rid of native cultures and get along well with the mainstream of modern society. He becomes confused on account of his bicultural dilemma.

His superego tells him that he is supposed to be accustomed to his own culture and locate himself in the tribe since he is born a native boy. However, his absence of Indian culture makes him an outsider once again so that his ego remains prevailed in him. Due to his segregation from the tribal tradition, his participation in the ceremonial contest turns out to be a failure: “When it came Abel's turn, he made a poor showing, full of caution and gesture” (38). And he couldn't face up the sudden incident when the albino who is the winner in the contest strikes him with the rooster according to the tradition: “Abel was not used to the game, and the white man was too strong and quick for him” (39). He becomes an outsider from the ancient traditions and achieves nothing in integrating himself into his own culture. The breach with his tribal tradition and the influence of the devastating war drive Abel into a state of isolation caused by the environment. Even the dogs would treat him as an outsider: “He walked swiftly through the dark streets of the town and all

the dogs began to bark” (10). With view to the unchangeable living patterns the tribal people adhere to, he couldn't come to terms with the ancient beliefs in the poor and wild village. A case in point is Abel's attitude towards his shoes. The shoes feature the hallmarks of the fashionable modern society in America and appear as rare things in the Indian village. Among people living there the heels of the shoes are supposed to be cut off to be used so as to prevent the holy earth on which human beings rely from harm done by the heels, but Abel does not abide by this ancient rule. Moreover, he views the shoes as objects of fine craft and lovingly cherishes them: “They were too large for Abel, but he wore them anyway, had waited a long time for the occasion to wear them” (93). He has grown blind to traditions and cultures of his own tribe, anxious to join in the modern society which is unknown to him at all.

As Abel's ego prevails, his id and superego are still working. His isolation in Indian culture, resulting from the environment and experience and bi-cultural dilemma, leads him to frustration, and he feels that he never has any sort of appropriate identity.

### **3. Being Distrusted and Trampled on in White Culture**

In Freud's theory of the psyche, the ego functions as a mediator between the id and the superego. The ego is involved with the perception of reality and the adaptation to reality. Abel's id before he is sentenced to jail shows the rebellion against his own culture. On the contrary, his superego demands his fusion into the tribal tradition. “Thus the ego finds itself the seat of anxiety, beset by potential dangers from three directions—by the id, the super-ego, and the external world” (Freud *The Ego and the Id* 84). Therefore, Abel's ego, the mediator, finds its way in his undergoing mental pressures and suffering physical injury.

Feeling marginalized and isolated in his native land, Abel departs from his tribe. During the bloodcurdling war the stability in his mind is further harassed instead of healthily developing. As an Indian among the white soldiers he is rejected an equal identity by his battle companions. He is an outsider in the eyes of them, which prevents him from becoming integrated. The mainstream surroundings view him as an alien without approving of his individuality, excluding him from their culture. The passion for freedom and modern society undergoes frustration and his identity confusion remains a problem.

“The Priest of the Sun” is linked by a series of image from which the reader gains fragmentary vision of the facts that lead to Abel's frustration and decline. The fragments are still vague till Ben Benally's first-person narration in the chapter “The Night Chanter” which shows a complete state of Abel's experience in Los Angeles. By doing this, Momaday presents the reader Abel's ego in consciousness during the last period of frustration and decline as well as the social and cultural fence that contribute to his setbacks. Abel leads a miserable life in Los Angeles after the release from prison. He for the second time steps into the modern society, suffering again from the frustration and the pains of being stereotyped as an Indian.

According to the first-person narration of Ben Benally, as Abel start to work in a factory as a result of the relocation policy he appears kind of shy and scared. He looks right down at his work all the time, as if there was nobody around. He endeavors to keep silent and patient with his tolerance trialed to the utmost. Unfortunately his hope to lead a steady life is disillusioned by the reality which fills him with more frustration and pressure.

Ego is rational and conscious, thus it will find its way to restrict the desires and pursue the hopes. As he reenters the modern society after getting out of the jail, he struggles to fuse himself into the white world, only to suffer mental and physical injuries. The workers including Ben and Abel are always hastened to fulfill the piling-up orders by the headman. Abel doesn't have anyplace to stay except an old frame building with cracks in the walls and smell of sour. Without Benally's help, Abel would live in the shabby storeroom. Anyway he somehow tries to get used to the hard life, yet he is unfortunate to have unpleasant visitors--the parole officer and the Relocation people kept coming around. Those frequent visitors are eager to know whether he has been staying out of trouble at all, which gets on his nerves always. In the meantime they don't forget to warn him of the bad effect of alcohol and running around which may get him into the prison again. Therefore Abel has to dwell on that all day for they will spare no effort in reminding him of behaving himself. Going back to his hometown occasionally may enter his mind, whereas his prevailing ego serves as a reminder that his life would fade gradually in the hopeless and deserted Pueblo with numerous old men so that he is supposed to forget it at all. Thus he has to put up with severe mental pressure originating from the unpleasant visitors who wouldn't let him alone and coming around to warn him so much so that he is getting all mixed up pretty soon.

Hurt never comes singly. One night after they have worked a long day, they go over to Tosamah's place to play poker games. For an unknown reason, Tosamah "started in on him (Abel)" and unexpected talking comes out from Tosamah: "not directly, you know, but he started talking about long-hairs and the reservation and all" (140, 141), which makes Abel fly into a rage. Though he is isolated in Indian culture, his ego remains attached to his village; though his ego hopes to live in the modern society peacefully and steadily, he wouldn't let anybody speak ill of his tribe. Consequently he is deeply hurt inside somehow, feels pretty bad. However, the affection and longing of the reservation in his ego is awakened more or less by sticking up for his tribe, which in fact weakens his illusion of locating himself in modern society with an identity in his ego. Afterwards he undergoes frustration in job hunting which leads to his decline so that the bitter disappointment hangs over him after the frustration.

Worse still, the appearance of a police officer Martinez disillusioned Abel thoroughly with his wicked and dirty act, which marks the climax of Abel's suffering in this stage. As a police officer who stands for the regulator of the modern society, Martinez implements robbery of Ben and Abel and even beats Abel with the stick on his hands.

The police officer's insult at once drives him beyond the limit of his tolerance.

He could not cheat himself any more into a falsehood that further patience would bring steadiness and peace into his life. Therefore, he is determined to avenge himself on Martinez. Instead of taking revenge, he is almost beaten to death by Martinez. Read the following description, we will see how seriously he is bullied:

Abel's ego is completely destroyed in pursuing a peaceful life in modern society. Gradually he comes to realize that he doesn't belong to here. The frustration and pain he undergoes disillusion his hope but wind him up the way to return to his own culture. His ego fails to adapt himself to the modern society but may find its way in his origin place.

#### **4. Gaining Racial Awareness from the Struggling**

Noam once said: "The ego acts according to the reality principle; i.e. it seeks to please the id's drive in realistic ways that will benefit in the long term rather than bring grief" (Noam, Stuart T., et al. Ego Development and Psychopathology 190). Abel experiences the closed doors one after another in pain and disappointment. Frustration always keeps his company on his way to pursuit of his so-called freedom and joint himself into the modern society. It seems that he has no path to take. His ego finds it difficult to adjust to the life outside his Indian reservation so that his slumbering mind of racial awareness is activated to seek life for him.

In the previous chapter, we know that he feels isolated and estranged in Indian culture partly owing to his mother's early death. In his pain he recalls the experience during his childhood. He recollects fat Josie, a woman in his tribe, who speaks kindly to him and often gives him sweet things to eat after his mother's death. There is no one else but Josie will make faces and carry on like a fool trying to make him laugh, which serves as a great comfort to his little heart. It is in his pain that he finds that there is still a connection and affection between his tribe and him.

In the novel, his racial awareness that grows in Abel upon his confronting death can be found in: "He awoke coughing; there was blood in his throat and mouth. He was shuddering with cold and pain. [...] He peered into the night: all around the black land against the star-bright, moon-bright sky" (91). In this scene, the moon imagery associates his present with the past. He always recollects his childhood in reservation which brings calmness to him and arouses his attachment to the village. The view of the moon serves as an associative link between his tribe and himself, and he takes a new acquaintance of the moon. Thus he considers the moon as such a significant impact that he begins the trip of returning to Indian tradition on account of his approaching the concept of the universe held by Indians. His recalling of land, sea, fish, a group of birds and eagle hunting further shows his connection with the tribe. Man and animal, land and sea are linked in their association with the moon. This concept resembles the notion of the interrelation of all the natural forces in the Indians' view of the universe. Being gradually conscious of this idea Abel finds that he too is attached closely to Indian culture and gets a share in it.

In his imagery while suffering the severe injury, "he was overcome with longing

and loneliness, for suddenly he saw old men running after evil in the night” (91). He has desire to flee from the reservation and he undergoes loneliness in modern society. But now he gets rid of them by imagining his people running: “They run with great dignity and calm, not in the hope of anything, but hopelessly; neither in fear nor hatred nor despair of evil, but simply in recognition and with respect.” (91, 92)

Failing to get a complete identity in white society fills him with desperation and pain. Therefore he admires the old men with dignity and calm who have nothing to fear, which appeals to him and arouses his racial awareness and the desire to return. Abel’s association with the fish indicates his transformation in his ego:

This passage seems to be of no specific significance at the beginning. However, its connotation gradually identifies itself with our understanding of the connection of Abel with the fish. He is lying on the sand just like the fish on the beach. He resembles the fish to be moved from his residence which brings him up with the native culture. During the time he becomes delirious and fearful, the image of fish frequently comes to his mind. He is filled with compassion towards the fish and gradually he realizes his state of mind: “sad, longing and wonder”. Eventually he finds himself a fish longing to go back to the sea which it belongs to. Fish without water would die soon. Similarly a Native American, once discarding his own culture, would be rootless. Momaday ingeniously applies the fish imagery to imply Abel’s frustration and pain as well as indicate the development in his ego after his gaining awareness of his state. As Abel struggles to stick up for his hope and ultimately run away from death, the fish is supposed to endeavor to go back to the sea which is the safe shelter for it. In his pain and weariness he imagines that Milly and Ben run on the beach and he is with them in the shadow of the moonlight. He also “sees” the fishes are far away to safety in the depths of sea and “there was nothing but the moonlight and the long white margin of the sea on the beach” (111). His racial awareness is awakened by his identifying with the fish in his mind. Abel realizes that the world of his tribe is the only place where he could achieve a significative existence and a complete and true identity. Thus he will in the end return home to his tribal village.

Since Abel has gained new insight into his connection with the Indian culture, he gets ready to produce a formal union through the Night Chant which Benally, his close friend sings for him:

The transformation he goes through due to his imagination and recollection empowers him to make the mental commitment of subjecting himself to the healing strength of the Night Chant. By doing that he exhibits his newly gained belief in the influence of tribal ceremonials. It is a step of great significance for Abel’s found association with the Indian ceremony which provokes his consciousness of his Indian origin. Through the ceremonial process his isolation in Indian culture begins to disappear and Abel recovers consciously the harmony with the universe. The Night Chant, therefore, revives him and restores his internal balance with the environment around him. He is convinced that only by returning to the tribal tradition, can an individual assimilate into the tribe in order to establish group consciousness and eliminate isolation and frustration. It is the ancient Indian

tradition that arouses Abel's racial awareness and releases him from the confusion and frustration.

According to Freud, the superego functions on opposite sides of the id. The superego endeavors to behave in a socially acceptable manner, whereas the id just desires immediate self-satisfaction. The superego takes over our sense of correct and wrong. It is of help for us to act appropriately so as to fit into the society. The superego's requirements always stand against that of id. Thus the ego sometimes has trouble in trying to balance and harmonize the two. As for Abel, his superego consists of the ego ideal that it is right to follow and stick to the Indian tradition as well as the conscience that it is wrong to rebel against the tribal culture and tradition. Yet he wishes to assimilate into the modern, industrial America under the influence of his id. His ego, thus, has to serve three harsh masters—his id, his superego and the surroundings (his undergoing setbacks, discrimination and pain). Afterwards, his ego which follows the “reality principle” finds his association with his tribe and begins to function as the mediator between the two. As directed by his superego, his ego transcends his id and awakens him to be on the way of returning.

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