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The Names: A Memoir
Reclaiming Identity Through Remembrance

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Abstract

The present research paper seeks to analyze and understand the importance of remembrance in N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir* through cultural memory theory. Momaday explores the themes of reclaiming identity and cultural heritage and the role of remembrance and names in achieving this. The act of imagination, which unfolds through storytelling, myths, dominant historical records and personal musings, is important to the author to understand his identity. The paper analyzes how the blood memory is important to the author which is suggestive of the past of a community rather than an individual. Through remembrance, he is able to bring a historical continuity to the history of his family and collective memory of his tribe. The names are significant in this process of remembrance as they carry with them the history, ecology and spirit of the tribe. This recitation of names is also reflective of resistance and resilience of Native American people against cultural erasure through colonization and forceful assimilation.

Key Words: Remembrance, Myths, Collective Memory, Resistance, Resilience.

INTRODUCTION

N. Scott Momaday, a celebrated Native American author of Kiowa heritage is renowned for being the first Native American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), which ushered in an era of Renaissance for Native American writings. Momaday is a master of memory and traditions whose works are infused with the stories of

Kiowas in traditions of Kiowa storytelling and oral traditions. He deals with the issues of Native American identity, loss of culture and tradition as a result of colonization and displacement in his novels. To speak of the problems of culture, writes Julio Cortazar, in "Literature and Identity," "is in itself a cultural problem, with all the risks involved in the area to be explored" (35). This idea of culture

resonates with the experiences of Native American people as they have been separated from their lands, cultures, memories, stories, and languages which are integral to cultural identity.

The Names: A Memoir, published in 1976, is a continuation of the author's search for identity and roots in a society devastated over a period of time and shows how remembering ancestors, landscapes and names can recreate a broken cultural identity and pass it from generation to generation, creating cultural memory in the process which seems difficult at first to the author. Set in the backdrop of Arizona Desert where the ancient Native American cultures flourished and left their indelible mark on the land before they were trounced by the European colonizers, the text emphasizes the importance of the names which are related to the individual as well as tribal identity. Momaday connects the recital and remembrance of the names to the understanding of the self and the society. Throughout the text, Momaday explores the themes of loss of identity, belonging, the importance of remembrance and names in ascertaining one's identity. Momaday laments his forgetfulness and then tries to remember and reimagine his identity and roots and in the process creates a cultural memory not only for himself but his tribe as well. The paper scrutinizes the text through the lens of cultural memory theory to understand how his recital of names of people, places and animals reimagines the identity of his people. Key thinkers of the cultural memory theory are Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann, Friedrich Nietzsche and Aby Warburg.

Cultural Memory Theory

Cultural memory theory focuses on the idea that the identity of a group is not just based on biology, instead it is kept alive through oral traditions, stories, myths, symbols, artifacts, rituals and places related to a group. Native American people whose cultures and traditions

faced centuries of colonial destruction, displacement and then forced assimilation, remembering becomes a powerful way to heal, resist colonial erasure, assertion and reclaiming their identity. Martin T. Dinter gives the definition of cultural memory theory as "a framework which elucidated the relationship between the past and the present. At its most basic level, it explains why, how, and with what results certain pieces of information are remembered"(1). Cultural memory makes it possible to reconstruct the past of a people not as passive nostalgia but as a lived experience. Dinter further explains, "History is a list of dates, names, and events, but memory is the experience of these very deeds and personalities, which, when recalled, evokes residual emotions" (2). Momaday recalls during his journey the names, people, places and animals which bring memories of his past and his tribe's past from the residues of history. The multidisciplinary field of cultural memory theory is concerned with the processes, forms, shared memories, rituals, artifacts and cultural symbols in the lives of individual and society.

Sturat Hall considers cultural memory as the most significant aspect in constructing cultural identity as he views cultural memory and identity as a fluid, constant process shaped by memory, power dynamics and re-narration. Cultural memory is based on interaction between history, memory, imagination and collective recollections of the past. This cultural identity is based on a sharing a stable history, heritage and tradition which is crucial for creating a collective identity. Jan Assmann concentrates on the symbolic aspects of memory and their role in shaping the collective identity of a people. *The Names: A memoir* creates these memories not only for Momaday but for the whole community. The text, a semi autobiographical account of the author's journey to retrieve his history, is full of myths, stories, symbols and recollections of the past of the author and the tribe. Through his remembrance, Momaday challenges the

dominant white narratives which are a way of maintaining social control over colonized and marginalized groups with his counter memory and alternative representations to reclaim his identity which he himself had forgot in the journey of his life. Theory of past memory defines identity as a dynamic process which is constructed through personal memory, collective tradition, and the landscape. Momaday considers memory important in the process of preserving past as it resists cultural erasure and is a way of reconnection to the past for the Native Americans. The blending of his memories with the oral traditions of the Kiowas is an assertion that the identity of an individual is intertwined with that of his community. For the purpose of his recreating his past, Momaday has to rely on his imagination and remembrance which is a difficult task considering that the past is lost to dominant narratives as Momaday states, "Memory begins to qualify the imagination, to give it another formation, one that is peculiar to the self. I remember isolated, yet fragmented and confused, images- and images, shifting, enlarging, is the word, rather than moments or events- which are mine alone" (*The Names* 61). The text raises question as to how to retrieve something that has faced rupture of such magnitude. The title of the text itself symbolizes the importance of names as they carry within themselves the history and identity of an individual and his community. The paper looks into how blood memory, landscape and names create memories for the individual and the tribe and provide a historical continuity to their heritage by applying cultural memory theory.

Blood Memory and Historical Continuity

Cultural memory theory looks at the ways how groups pass down memories across many generations. Momaday imagines his past as he believes in the idea of blood memory which is based on the idea that each person carries a subconscious recollection of their ancestors' experiences in their blood. Joanna ZIARKOWSKA explains blood memory in

"History Lives in the Body" as an "...understanding of history expressed in terms of geographical locations as well as bodily experiences and sensations that are remembered, passed on and inherited in the same way genetic material is transmitted from one agent to another. Hence, history, memory and indigenous bodies become integral and integrated components of contemporary Native American identity" (2). The idea justifies how and why Native American people have inherited intergenerational trauma, survival instincts, knowledge of their culture and tradition and an irrevocable connection to their lands. First pronounced in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, the concept of blood memory is fully developed and defined in *The Names: A Memoir*. Blood memory theory believes that history lives in the body of individuals which has been passed down to them through generations along with traumas. Momaday tries to fill in the gaps in his family tree by imagining things and incidents from the past. He imagines about what would have happened to his Kiowa people on their migration and the scenes of buffalo hunting or the sun dance. He had never visited these places earlier or met those people but he remembers these geographical locations and people as his memory is transmitted from the older generation to him through his blood. Joanna ZIARKOWSKA further explains, "Remembering, or blood memory, thus becomes a corporeal as much as a mental sensation, divorced from temporal and spatial situatedness, facilitating and authenticating identification with indigeneity" (3). The concept of blood memory challenges and deconstructs the discourse of blood quantum which was an attempt of the U.S. government to control and limit the rights of Native Americans over their lands.

Momaday rejects the identity given to him by the authorities on the basis of the percentage of Native American blood in his body. The accounts of his mother depict her as a

Cherokee while he traces the history of his great great-grand grandmother first as a slave in the Kiowa tribe but later on as a married woman in the same tribe beginning a new blood line. Imagination and remembrance are thus, sacred ways to restore not only his fading memory but also of his people. Chadwick Allen points out the importance of blood memory in Momaday's works, "The concept was coined in Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), and developed in all of his subsequent works to date, blood memory achieves tropic power by blurring distinctions between racial identity and narrative" (94). In Momaday's works blood memory is presented as an experience deeply rooted in Native American epistemologies, their spiritual connection to their landscapes in spite of the fact that these lands are taken away from them, their oral traditions and their imagination to have a communication with their ancestors. In the text, Momaday remembers how his own blood status is declared as half blood by the United States Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, Anadarko at Oklahoma.

Momaday rejects the birth certificate as a defining document and a factor of his Native American identity by asserting his identity through his Kiowa tribal name, Tosai-talee, which translates to 'rock tree boy' in English. Momaday remembers or rather imagines his first journey from Oklahoma to the Black Hills, which is his tribal home, "When I was six months old my parents took me to Devil's tower, Wyoming, which is called in Kiowa Tosai, 'rock tree.' Here are stories within stories; I want to imagine a day in the life of a name, Pohd-lohk, who gave me a name" (*The Names* 42). The blood memory, thus, defies the discriminatory and racist policies of the whites and symbolizes the resilience and resistance of the Native Americans against these policies. The paper examines how the recitation of names becomes a tool in creating a collective memory for himself and his tribe. The blood memory, thus, results in articulation and assertion of

Native American identity through collectively inherited memory. This also reflects how Native Americans have lost connection with their ancestry and identity and are forced to inhabit two worlds widely different from each other which further creates confusion in their identity. Even though, Momaday is on his journey towards his Native roots, he is apprehensive as he writes, "...And now I am afraid, nearly terrified, and yet I have no will to resist; I remain attentive, strangely curious in proportion as I am afraid. ... I try to cut out, but I have no voice" (63). This is reflective of how the lost identity has created a world of fear and confusion for the Native Americans still, the author is determined to retrieve his lost identity by remembering and reimagining the past. Even the proof of his birth is used not as a proof of his half blood status but as a proof of his Native roots and ancestry. The birth certificate reads, "This is to certify that the records of this office show that Navarro Scott Momaday was born February 27, 1934 at Lawton, Oklahoma and is of 7/8 degree Indian blood, as shown on the Kiowas Census opposite number 2035" (42). Without this proof, they are denied their Native identity and services owed by the United States government due to treaty obligations. Momaday, however, does not consider the requirement of a document as a proof of his Native identity as Joanna ZIARKOWSKA observes, "On the contrary, it is acts of storytelling which situate the speaker in the sacred geography of his ancestors and collapse the temporal distance between the speaker and his kinship from pre-contact times, establishing a continuum between the past and the present moment" (5). His blood memory is a source of his identity and a continuous process of taking this memory to the next generations and a rejection of the criteria set by the United States government. Momaday's creation of memories through his vivid imagination is a tribute to his culture and an assertion that memories of a person include "a society, a past, and a place" (Bevis 585). Remembrance, thus is vital to the acts of constructing personal and tribal identities when they have faced

annihilation due to historical forces and acts of colonization and displacement.

Landscape as Place of Memory

Cultural memory theory describes places of memory, physical places where a tribe's history took place as a part of the process of remembrance and creating a collective identity. In the text, *The Names: A Memoir*, Momaday presents the American Southwest landscape as living place of memory of his Kiowa people. The physical landscape is a place for personal identity, tribal heritage and history, and ancestry for Momaday. The text presents various incidents and scenes which weave the physical landscape and environment with remembrance and identity as Momaday absorbs the beauty of the landscape in his heart and memory, "The angle of the Washita River and Rainy Mountain Creek points to the east, and the thick red waters descend into the depth of the Southern Plains, as if they measure by means of an old, organic equation the long way from the Continental Divide to the heart of North America" (4). The landscape gets the centerstage in his imagination of his past. Momaday's early memories are tied to his imagination of the place in Oklahoma and the Southwest. He writes in the text, "Some of my earliest memories are of the storms, the hot rain lashing down and lightning running on the sky- and the storm cellar into which my mother and I descended so many times when I was very young" (5). Childhood details of places and emotions of the author showcase how memory and geography are intertwined. The imagination of the vast plains, red earth and canyons make it possible for the author to make two worlds meet. As Momaday writes in *Man Made of Words* how "a man looks at a given landscape and takes possession of it in his blood and brain" (101). His visit to the ancestral place is an effort to imagine his personal and tribal heritage, a connection to his culture and identity. Momaday's name links him to Tsoai, Devil's Tower, a giant stone landmark which sacred to the Kiowas. The landmark carries the mythical story of the seven

sisters and their brother who turned into a bear and chased them, the seven sisters turned into the stars of the Big Dipper to save themselves. Travelling through Oklahoma, the Navajo country and the Jemez Pueblo, Momaday physically retraces the roots of his ancestors. Land is a living space for Momaday, a living archive that remembers the songs, camps, and footsteps of the Kiowas.

Momaday uses the power of remembrance and language to reclaim his tribal identity and the text acts as an act of imagination and rather than chronological details of his family, tribe and himself. The author traces his family history while going on a journey to his ancestral place where his people are no longer living. In cultural memory theory, certain symbols act as vessels containing a people's history which in the text take the form of actual names. The memoir opens with a famous line, "My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tosai-talee; therefore, I am." The name was given to him by a Kiowa storyteller named Pohd-lohk and in Kiowa tradition, the name is suggestive of the source of life. Momaday strongly believes that the names just do not serve the purpose of calling someone, in fact, they give identity to people. His act of remembering, reciting and writing down the names of his ancestors connects him directly to the collective memory of the entire tribe. The physical journey to his Native place is not just a return to the place but a spiritual one with memories of the past. It is a symbolic journey to reclaim the lost identity as William Beavis in "Native American Novels: Homing In" writes, "A central figure in our literature, the imagined landscape of literature is marked by the protagonists journeying across the terrain. But where 'American whites keep leaving home' to find themselves and make their mark in the world, the hero of Native American novels 'come home' to the self by coming home to the tribal landscape and the mythic terrain" (581-82). The journey is an act of remembrance and creation of identity for the individual and the community. Momaday also

acknowledges the importance of naming a place in the text as these names do not just provide a name to be located on the map, rather, a name attached to a place preserves its history and memory. Throughout the text, each landmark carries stories of the origin of the Kiowas, myths attached to their origin, and historical events. Walking through the landscape of the Southwest symbolizes the past, myths, and the footsteps of his ancestors on the land which makes the landscape sacred for him. *The Names: A Memoir* emphasizes how earth and all its appearances preserve the cultural heritage of a people.

The Names: A Connection to the Past

Through the prism of cultural theory, the paper explores how the process of naming and remembering helps in creation and preservation of cultural identity. The title of the text is justified with the beginning of the text, "My name is Tsoai-talee, I am, therefore, tsoai-talee; therefore, I am" (*The Names*, Preface). The loss of names symbolizes the crisis of Native American identity and culture as a result of colonization, influence of modern society and destruction of oral traditions. Recovering and reclaiming an identity after historical trauma is a Herculean task which requires actual remembrance as Momaday tries to create a family tree for himself by naming and detailing the names and places. The depiction of Kiowa and other Native American traditions in the text reflects complex relationship between kinship, land and the tribe. The intermingling of the names and culture is a suggestion for the young Native American people to understand themselves as it is not possible in the present to separate the two. Momaday emphasizes that a person's name is one of the most important aspects of their identity as it connects them to their culture, tribe, beliefs and land. The recitation of these names links them to the past and creates memories for the younger generations. As Momaday writes, "My father whose Indian name is Huan-toa, was christened Alfred Morris... Alfred Morris Mammedaty (the

institution of the surname was adopted by the Kiowas during my grandfather's time) grew up in the house and arbor, and in the town of Mountain view, across the creek" (*The Names* 34). In the process of reciting the names, Momaday depicts how Native American traditions of naming are different from those of European Americans and also constructs his own identity by analyzing their cultural, and historical contexts. The process also presents resilience of Native American people even though their identities are trampled over a period of time. Names have unparalleled power for him as they are sources of his ancestry, heritage and personal identity. His desire to understand the significance of his name also symbolizes the same desires of young Native Americans who are uprooted from their roots. Allen Chadwick writes in "Blood (and) Memory," "In the vexed U.S. context, where the ongoing colonial/postcolonial status of American Indian individuals and nations is hotly contested, the debate is often focused on the likelihood of indigenous memories surviving into contemporary times in the face of high degrees of cultural and linguistic assimilation, physical relocation, and genetic hybridity" (93). Old names, family photographs, myths, and symbols all play a significant role in creating memories for the author. The in charge of naming in his tribe kept a book of pictographs the purpose of which was to keep the memory, and culture of the Kiowa tribe alive through the pictures and names. Momaday writes about Pohd-lohk's passion for keeping records:

He could not remember how it was that he came to his special regard for history, or to his resolve, that he, Pohd-lohk, should set it down in pictures on a page, but the book had become a serious affair in his life. In it he indicated at first events that had been recorded on an older calendar, a painted hide, then things that had been told to him by his elders or that fell within the range of his own memory. Now that he was old, Pohd-lohk liked to

look backwards in time, and although he could neither read nor write, this book was his means. It was an instrument with which he could reckon his place in the world. (48)

The blurred memory of his people comes alive to Momaday while looking at the pages of the album. Further, the recital of the names in the beginning and at the end of the text reflect his efforts to create an identity which has been threatened and almost destroyed by the dominant white culture. His successfully tracing his roots from his great grandmother to his parents symbolizes the resilience of the author and his tribe. This will to search for one's roots has been an integral part of the Native American writings of the 1970s.

CONCLUSION

The text, *The Names: A Memoir* is an act of this remembrance and creation of identity from the blurred lines of narratives set by the white dominant narratives. Momaday's exploration of his identity as an act of imagination, remembrance, recital of names, connection with the landscape, culture and blood memory rejects the officially documented definition of identity. Momaday writes in "The Man Made of Words," "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined" (55). It is this imagination, this remembrance which helps him create a past for himself and his people in the twentieth century. Momaday reclaims his culture, identity, heritage, and stories not only for himself but for the people of his tribe through his remembrance.

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