

Disposition of Human Psyche, the Interdependence of Thought and Action in

N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child*

G. Karthikeyan ^a, S. Vanitha ^b

^a PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

^b Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

The interrelation between cognition and action is vital because human deeds are an outcome of their thoughts and the two aspects linked to one another. Likewise people's action differs according to the external factors primarily socio-cultural contexts. Fine thoughts can be created only by the pleasant atmosphere that replicates in genuine deeds but if the situation is tense human psyche is also get stressed. It is obvious that individual's actions are decided by the notion of mind and the external contexts. This consciousness is frankly expressed by the Native American writers, chiefly N. Scott Momaday, who has been accomplishing his task of expounding the true nature of Native Americans through his novels and serves as a spokesperson of Native American literature. The objective of this research paper is to explore the propensity of human psyche of the protagonists of N. Scott Momaday's novel *The Ancient Child*.

KEYWORDS: Spirit, socio-cultural context, compromise, disillusionment, contentment.

Human deed is the exposition of their spirit which exhibits the condition of an individual whether he is happy or sad. "Our actions also have an influence on our thoughts and feelings" (Jhangiani and Tarry 208). Similarly the actions of human beings are rooted from their personal consciousness that if they are depressed their deeds also sadden them but if they are happy their actions will please them. The outside world serves as a major factor in deciding person's mood. Jhangiani and Tarry stated "human behaviour is determined by both a person's characteristics and the social situation" (6). If the environment suits to them they reap happiness, if it is not they get disappointment. These generalizations are well expressed in Native American novels as the Native American literature explicates the inner being of American Indians. Native Americans have rich oral tradition since their literature begins as an oral literature which consists of myths, legends, chants and songs which intended to be heard and passed from generation to generation through spoken language. The cultural history and the oral tradition of Native Americans are preserved by their written literature in the contemporary world.

N. Scott Momaday is the first Native American writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his first novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Since the award, Momaday came to prominence in the literary arena and critics stated that the Native American Renaissance started after the publication of the novel in 1968. From that time on indigenous writings of Native Americans flourished in America which

attained the prime place in literary world. Momaday is considered as one of the most successful Native American writer as he serves a major influence for his contemporaries and successors. As a Kiowa writer Momaday's focus is on his culture and customs which seen in his writings are rooted from the Kiowa oral tradition. He is lauded by the mainstream American writers for his accomplishment in his profession. Momdays poems, novels and memoirs exhibit the American Indians psyche and the culture. His second novel *The Ancient Child* was published in 1989 which shows the protagonists psychological journey through the modern and native world. As mentioned above, human's actions are reflection of their psyche, the state of mind of two leading roles in the novel is expressed through their deeds.

The protagonists Locke Setman and Grey are Native Americans though they belong to Kiowa tribe, did not know each other in the beginning. Locke Setman known as Set, lives away from his tribal roots in San Francisco, California. As a painting artist he found his interest in painting and received several awards that made him popular throughout the country as the people thought that having his paintings is a pride for them. Though he succeeded in his career he is in the verge of losing his soul because of the numerous demands upon him by the modern world. "Set's blind acceptance of the needs of others affects his intrapsychological makeup" (Sceners-Zapico 509). More often he compromises himself in his career and personal life those make him passive. He even weeps when the disappointment is severe as it is one way of exposing his grief. He paints exactly what he has seen in his soul and his aim is to give people what they had not seen before "but it seemed no one cared about that, no one among his associates" (Momaday 37). In his career he understands that the people are insincere, though he puts great effort to give extraordinary of himself in his paintings, people could not understand the inner meaning of it.

With the grief Set wants a child to come to his studio to see the paintings in the wall and his effort in it which was not seen by the people because he knows that "the dealers and the critics were narrow-eyed and glib" (Momaday 37). Nevertheless he is renowned in his career he struggles of his commitment to cope with the demand of his audience. He is a forty-four year middle aged man who leads a difficult life because of his compromises in his career. Compromise is not a part of his life but his life is a part of compromises. He understands that he wasted his precious time and talent to fake outer world that offers him disillusionment. In his career there is always due in his promise because he wants to paint something but he is obliged to paint something that is the intricacy of his life. He desires to try new paintings but the public incessantly want the same thing from him that makes him drained. When he understands the obscurity of the world he tries to save his soul.

As mentioned earlier, the deeds of a person is an exposure of his inner state, here it is suited well to Set, as he is a "struggling artist in San Francisco" (Morgan 9). He paints a self-portrait on paper that is in brown and black backgrounds along with the hands are on the hips. The clothes are dipped with paints and the body looks tall besides the hands and legs are slim and long. The head is slant to one side and the hair is uncombed. The expression of the picture is mysterious and it is a "man of sorrow, a man of deep feelings" (Momaday 39). The portrait is a reflection of Set's inner complexity that is rooted from the exterior world where he lives among the complexities.

Life is not identical for individuals that are quite apt for the protagonists as Set suffers while Grey leads a happy life who is a nineteen year old girl, lives with her grandfather's elder brother, Worcester Meat in Cradle Creek, Oklahoma. Since her childhood, she is fond of horses as she keeps a horse named Dog. The close relationship she has with her horse induces her to portray herself to it. In her portrayal she is a doe who looks graceful and stunning besides dressed beautifully that is comparable to kings and queens. As she portrays herself to her horse, she describes Dog that is four years old male stallion which is black in color that looks pretty and handsome. The Dog right away comes in front of her whenever she calls it as they have such intimate rapport. These portrayals show the deep bond between Grey and Dog and it mainly exposes her peaceful spirit. Her fondness with Dog turns her to be a good horse rider that brought her twenty eight triumphs in women rodeo races.

Grey's life is fruitful by her acquaintance with Dog and her great grandmother Kope'mah who is a Kiowa medicine woman and behind the walls of Grey's becoming of a medicine woman. Grey's immense respect on Kope'mah is apparent that she often visits her in her death bed besides Kope'mah also frequently calls Grey. She attains peaceful life on the Cradle Creek which is possible by her stallion horse and Kope'mah. Grey enjoys her life in the village while Set sheds tears for his sorrowfulness in the city. San Francisco ruined Set's soul and he always worried about his restlessness. His fate drives him to Oklahoma through the telegram that informs him the critical condition of Kope'mah. Though the inner pain irks his soul, he goes to Oklahoma, his native and the change of landscape brings solace to him because he finds greenery and tranquility everywhere. He is disappointed when he hears the death of Kope'mah and blames himself for arriving late to see Kope'mah alive. The above events express twisting of Set's psyche based on the socio-cultural contexts.

In Cradle Creek Set comes to know that Kope'mah and his grandmother Agabai were friends throughout their lives and his father Cate Setman was also dear to Kope'mah. But Set, who was adopted by Bent Sandridge, endures a difficult life in San Francisco and for him that life is a fake one. "He was used to city lights, and for him this moon was brighter than any he had ever seen" (Momaday 71). The moon in the city looks artificial for Set because his complexities in the city undisclosed the beauty of the moon to him but in Cradle Creek the moon brings bliss to his soul and the cool air gives him profound sleep that exposes his delight. His perception of objects differs according to his inner peace and the external environment.

Set's emotions are governed by the surrounding environment. In Cradle Creek Set stays at the house of Jessie who is a wife of Milo Mottledmare and granddaughter of Kope'mah. When they discuss about Grey, Set's curiosity arises on her. At night in the Cradle Creek he sees a girl, at first he is startled by her gazing, moreover he wants to yell at her but her calmness lessens his anger. He senses serenity in his soul when he understands that the girl is Grey. The atmosphere and the people in Cradle Creek amuse Set as he is taken to the dance ground and introduced to all by Jessie. His waiting for the beginning of the dance stimulates his spirit because he is probing to watch the ancient men's dance.

Set's psyche is already occupied by the enchanting beauty of Cradle Creek besides it is overwhelmed by the prettiness of Grey. When she asks him to apply paint on her face he is dumbfounded by her frankness. In the midst of happiness Set paints

her face by looking the painted face drawings of Kope'mah. Set understands that he led his life amidst the threat to his soul in San Francisco but in Cradle Creek the atmosphere is just opposite to the earlier one so as the condition of his soul. His life is a "psychic implications of geographical relocation" (Roberson and Momaday 32). In the village Grey is the sole good companion for Set who is the deep-seated person of his contentment that he is admired by her dance in the celebration.

When Set returns to San Francisco, his troubles started again which is visible in his canvases that the "dissonant elements begin to creep into his paintings" (Marston 14). His own paintings confuse him as it is a mirror image of his inner complexity. The perplexity of his life blocked everything in him as he says "my ear is stopped, and there is nothing but a buzzing in my brain" (Momaday 135). The white world totally spoiled Set both physically and spiritually. He could not concentrate on anything including his painting profession. When he draws a self-portrait it shows his inner state. "There were many of the dark figures in my work now. I don't know how to account for them" (Momaday 144). It is representation of his problematic life in the city. The distressing surroundings drive him to lose grip on his life as he becomes vulnerable and lost possession of himself. Set "became steadily more solemn and morose" (Momaday 153). His deeds express his psyche that is grief in San Francisco and cheerfulness in Cradle Creek. One of his paintings sold in New York is indistinct that is a man on horse. Alais Sancerre who owns the Colombes Gallery in Paris gives comments by looking Set's painting that "if you were not mysterious yourself, you could not create that which is mysterious on paper or on canvas" (Momaday 160). These lines describe the outcome of the ambiguity of Set through his paintings.

In Cradle Creek Grey's life is thoroughly different compared to Set's in San Francisco. She always gets deep sleep, makes prayer to the sun, listens to music and takes meat and tea. She usually reads book and through this she learns many histories and myths including the sisters of Low Mountain Yazzies and Desbah Yazzie's success in taking money from the ground on horse. Grey not only enjoys the adventure of the sister but also wants to do exactly what Desbah did in the game so she explained her horse what he must to do that is running steadily to assist her to take the stick from the earth. She succeeded on the eight try that she plucked the match stick from the ground. It is a reward of mutual understanding between herself and Dog. Her horse and the external factors such as the story in the book and her attempts to take money make her elated.

Grey is a great dreamer as "she had been born to dream. . . . To dream – that was at the center of life, hers anyway" (Momaday 173). Her peacefulness guides her to dream and write a chapbook on Billy the Kid, a notorious outlaw. "She brought to her writing the same positive and unquestioned attitudes that she brought to her horsemanship" (Momaday 185). She is good at horse riding that is a matter of coordination, realization and understanding. With her horse sense she often rides her horse wherever she pleased to go. The writing and horse riding gives her utmost enjoyment because of the satisfaction and accomplishment of her exact intention.

Grey's hands reveal her true nature as "they were made to touch the petals of flowers and the leaves of trees" (Momaday 195). Her hands are strong because she always holds heavy horses. Grey is known for her masks as she is a good mask maker. Working day and night on a mask she prepared most fitted mask for her head as "it was the most impressive mask she had yet made" (Momaday 198). The mask is an

outcome of her serene psyche and she beautifies the mask with hawk feathers. Her intention is to ride on her horse by wearing her own new mask on her head with a lance in her hand so she made a lance in the willow limb by shaping it with the help of the knife. Moreover she painted it and sticks turkey feathers on it. Wearing a holy mask and holding the lance above her head she rides in Dog through the lands of Worcester Meat besides making sounds. Her horse riding demonstrates the “knowledge of her incredible horse(wo)man-ship” and “her intense artistic engagements with dramatic horse rides” (Fleck 102). Her horse is the fastest among the horses of her village which obeys her order and acts according to her aspirations.

In San Francisco Set feels betrayed because his adopted father Bent has died of massive stroke. Set is confounded by the clusters of bad events in the city and he is even warned by the policeman when he stands motionless in front of his house for a long time at night. He paints in the canvases ceaselessly because he was “tormented, he slept almost not at all” (Momaday 213). He paints for consolation but it hurts him more as “they stood for his grief” as well as “they stood for the condition of his mind and soul” (Momaday 213). His paintings are crude that are an echo of his spirit. Though he consults doctors for his affliction, nothing worked because it “was a sickness of mind and soul” (Momaday 214). The depression makes him powerless and he is unable to do his regular works. Set’s friend Lola and manager Jason think that Set’s sufferings are derivation of nervous breakdown. The extreme anxiety turns him to be self-destructive and drunk. Sometimes he does not eat and sleep for days but when it goes extreme level he eats greedily and sleeps endlessly.

With Plains and Dog horse Grey feels free and when she rides on Dog she experiences a great journey as if she rides among sun, moon and stars. She knows the climate and the seasons of the village and her rides on horse in rain express her excitement. Though she lives the happiest life she often thinks of Set who attained success in his profession but lost his spirit. She knows his confusion, pain, sufferings and the losing possession of himself in the city. Whenever she thinks of him not only his physical appearance comes to her vision but also his spiritual aspects.

Set lost his sense that he searches Bent in every room in his house without the notion of his adopted father’s death. He has a vision of Bent standing in the fountain but when he approaches the figure of Bent, it vanishes slowly. The disturbing visions of Set urge him to commit violence. He is taken to the hospital when he lies unconsciously on the ground in his studio. “He had suffered severe fatigue and depression brought on by stress and strain, they said, extraordinary psychological pressure of one kind or another” (Momaday 241). In the hospital Dr. Charles Teague Terriman often speaks about bear to Set that makes him hostile and he breaks two teeth of the doctor. Set becomes the victim of white world because he allowed people to convince him and even dominate him but Grey’s world and her calm spirit assist her to lead a tranquil life.

Human’s attitude is profoundly influenced by the socio-cultural contexts and their internal state of soul is well exposed by their deeds. Thus it is comprehensible from the above analysis that people’s living environment plays a considerable role in deciding their mood and manners additionally their actions are the representation of their mental and emotional conditions.

Works Cited

- Fleck, Richard F., editor. *Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction*. Three Continents Press, 1993.
- Jhangiani, Rajiv, and Hammond Tarry. *Principles of Social Psychology - 1st International Edition*. 2014.
- Marston, Ed. "Splendor in the Grasslands." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*, 31 Dec. 1989, www.nytimes.com/1989/12/31/books/splendor-in-the-grasslands.html. Accessed 6 April 2018.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *The Ancient Child*. HarperPerennial, 1990.
- Morgan, Phyllis S. N. *Scott Momaday: Remembering Ancestors, Earth, and Traditions: An Annotated Bio-Bibliography*. American Indian Literature and Critical Studies, 2010.
- Roberson, Susan L., and N. Scott Momaday. "Translocations and Transformations: Identity in N. Scott Momaday's 'The Ancient Child.'" *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1/2, 1998, pp. 31-45. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1185106.
- Scenters-Zapico, John. "Cross-Cultural Mediation: Language, Storytelling, History, and Self as Enthymematic Premises in the Novels of N. Scott Momaday." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1997, p. 509.