

Reclaiming Kiowa Heritage: N. Scott Momaday's Cultural and Literary Journey

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ABSTRACT

N. Scott Momaday occupies a significant position in Native American literature for his sustained engagement with Indigenous history, cultural memory, ancestral traditions, and the relationship between people and place. His writings demonstrate how literature can become a means of recovering cultural knowledge and reaffirming an identity shaped by ancestral experience. This research paper examines Momaday's literary engagement with Kiowa traditions and his efforts to preserve and reinterpret the cultural heritage of his ancestors. The study focuses particularly on *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Names: A Memoir*, and selected poems and prose writings in which memory, storytelling, landscape, mythology, and ancestral voices become central to the recovery of cultural identity. Momaday draws upon Kiowa oral traditions, tribal histories, sacred places, and familial memories to reconnect the contemporary self with a deeply rooted cultural past. His representation of Rainy Mountain, the journey of the Kiowas, the sacred figure of Tai-me, and other elements of Kiowa tradition illustrates the enduring relationship between cultural identity and ancestral memory. The study argues that Momaday's literary journey represents an act of cultural reclamation through which memory, storytelling, and place contribute to the renewal of Kiowa identity and the preservation of Indigenous heritage.

Keywords: Ancestral Traditions, Cultural Identity, Kiowa Heritage, Native American Literature, Oral Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

N. Scott Momaday, an influential writer, poet, and visual artist, occupies a foundational position in the emergence of the Native American literary renaissance. Frequently regarded as a pioneer of contemporary Native American writing, he inspired a generation of Indigenous authors to explore, preserve, and articulate their cultural inheritance through literature. Momaday's own identity is shaped by a complex cultural background: his mother had Cherokee ancestry, while his father was of full Kiowa descent. Like many Indigenous writers who negotiate multiple cultural affiliations, Momaday's mixed heritage became an important impetus for his creative exploration and his search for a meaningful sense of self. As Elder observes, this "mestizo" identity propels him toward a creative and imaginative journey of self-discovery through writing (276). Consequently, Momaday's cultural identity is marked by a productive tension between familiarity and distance. Although Indigenous traditions remained central to his upbringing and creative imagination, his connection with the heritage of his Kiowa ancestors was mediated by geographical distance, linguistic separation, and the loss of direct ancestral contact. His literary work can therefore be understood as an ongoing effort to bridge this gap by recovering, reconstructing, and reaffirming the cultural memory of his Kiowa heritage.

Momaday's literary career can be viewed as a sustained effort to overcome the distance between his personal experience and his ancestral heritage. His Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* played a significant role in bringing Native American writing to wider literary attention and contains elements drawn from the author's own experiences. The novel's central character, Abel, undergoes a profound crisis of identity after returning to his community following military service. His struggle to regain a sense of belonging parallels aspects of Momaday's own experience of negotiating between Indigenous cultural traditions and the dominant American social world. Having spent part of his childhood in reservation communities while subsequently pursuing an academic career, Momaday similarly occupied a position between Indigenous and mainstream cultural spheres. This concern with recovering ancestral identity becomes even more explicit in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The work represents Momaday's gradual awakening to the significance of his Kiowa inheritance and his conscious attempt to establish a deeper relationship with it. Rather than presenting history as a single, fixed narrative, the book brings together three interconnected modes of remembering: traditional Kiowa narratives transmitted through his father, historical accounts of the Kiowa people, and Momaday's personal reflections. Through this distinctive structure, individual memory becomes connected with collective tribal history and oral tradition.

Momaday has acknowledged that he initially received his father's traditional stories without fully recognizing their cultural importance. His later awareness of the vulnerability of these narratives encouraged him to preserve them through writing.

His literary project thus becomes more than a personal search for identity; it is also an attempt to safeguard a threatened cultural inheritance. By recording ancestral stories, histories, and memories, Momaday creates a bridge between his own contemporary experience and the Kiowa past, enabling him to explore the resilience, continuity, and enduring identity of his people. An important aspect of Kiowa cultural identity that Momaday investigates is the tribe's historical tradition of mobility and nomadic existence. The Kiowas originally inhabited areas around the Upper Yellowstone and Missouri River regions, but during the eighteenth century they gradually moved southward toward the Black Hills, following the movement of large horse herds (Kracht). The acquisition and increasing significance of horses played a crucial role in shaping Kiowa mobility and transforming their social and cultural life. Yet the mountainous terrain of the Black Hills also presented limitations for a people whose way of life was closely associated with movement across extensive open spaces.

As Momaday reconstructs the historical migrations of his ancestors, his engagement with their journey becomes increasingly personal. His study of Kiowa movement enables him to develop what Elder describes as a "growing identification with his ancestors" and to understand their profound desire for openness, distance, and freedom of movement (276). In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday imaginatively enters the experience of the Kiowa nomad and considers how the landscape shaped their perception of themselves and their world. He presents the surrounding cliffs and restricted spaces as barriers to a people accustomed to measuring their sense of existence through expansive horizons. Their identity was therefore closely connected with the ability to travel freely and to experience the vastness of the land. Momaday deepens his engagement with Kiowa heritage through his profound attachment to the Great Plains and his recognition of the spiritual significance of the sun in Kiowa culture. After leaving the Black Hills, the Kiowa moved southward beyond the Platte River basin and eventually established themselves across the expansive landscapes of the central and southern Great Plains (Kracht). It was within this open environment that their relationship with the sun acquired spiritual importance. For the Kiowa, the sun belonged naturally to the vast plains and assumed an almost divine presence. Momaday observes that the sun is "at home" on the plains and possesses the "certain character of a god" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 13). Consequently, the sun becomes one of the recurring and powerful images through which Kiowa history, spirituality, and collective identity are expressed.

Momaday's treatment of the sun also establishes a connection between landscape, memory, and cultural identity. When he associates the sun with memories that "recede in time / into the hazy southern distances," the image suggests the gradual movement of the Kiowa away from the landscapes that once sustained their cultural life ("The Gourd Dancer" 152). Although mobility was fundamental to Kiowa existence, their nomadic identity remained deeply connected with the environment through which they moved. As Elder points out, the Kiowa were "grounded in an intrinsic relationship to a specific, open landscape" (276). Their displacement from this environment therefore represented not merely a geographical change but also a disruption of cultural continuity. Momaday's personal response to the plains reflects this ancestral attachment. His own life involved considerable movement between different places, yet his encounter with the Great Plains produces an immediate sense of recognition and belonging. Looking across the sunlit landscape, he experiences a profound transformation in perception: "And I could see the still, sunlit plain below, reaching away out of sight...Yes, I thought, now I see the earth as it really is; never again will I see things as I saw them yesterday or the day before" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 22). This moment marks an important stage in Momaday's search for cultural identity. The landscape becomes a medium through which the distance between the contemporary writer and his ancestors is momentarily overcome. His response to the plains echoes the attachment that his Kiowa ancestors developed toward this environment, allowing him to experience their relationship with the land across the boundaries of time and personal experience.

Land

The Kiowa people's longstanding relationship with their ancestral landscape underwent a profound disruption following the Treaty of Medicine Lodge in 1867. The treaty represented a significant turning point in relations between Indigenous communities and the expanding settler population, shifting the conflict beyond territorial control toward questions of cultural survival and identity ("Medicine Lodge"). Under its terms, the Kiowa agreed to relocate to the Fort Sill Reservation in southwestern Oklahoma, where they were placed alongside the Comanche. This forced settlement brought their centuries-old pattern of mobility to an end and separated them from the expansive landscapes that had been fundamental to their social, spiritual, and cultural existence. The loss of their homeland consequently became inseparable from the disruption of their traditional way of life. Despite this displacement, aspects of Kiowa religious and cultural practice survived within the reservation system. Among these was the Peyote tradition, which became particularly significant among the Kiowa and Comanche. Its ceremonial practices incorporated sacred objects such as peyote fans, which could be constructed from materials including wood, feathers, beads, hide, cotton cord, sinew, and dyes. During ceremonies, religious leaders used peyote to facilitate visionary experiences and establish a spiritual connection beyond ordinary perception ("Native American Church"). For Momaday, this tradition also has a deeply personal dimension because his grandfather, Mammedaty, was associated with the Peyote religion. Momaday recalls that through peyote his grandfather could "see things that other men do not see" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 51).

Another important stage in Momaday's recovery of his Kiowa identity is associated with his participation in the Gourd Dance Society, an ancient Kiowa fraternal organization of which he became a member. Through his participation in the dance and its accompanying ceremonial practices, Momaday establishes a direct connection with a tradition that embodies the themes of return, community, and cultural continuity. The ceremony involves distinctive objects and clothing, including feather fans, gourd rattles, velvet sashes decorated with gourd motifs, and bandoliers. Its significance is rooted in a traditional Kiowa narrative concerning a warrior who survives a battle and becomes separated from his people. During his attempt to find his way back, he encounters a red wolf who guides him toward his community and promises that the Gourd Dance and its songs will eventually be restored to the Kiowa ("Gourd Dancer" 152). The ceremony consequently came to be associated with the homecoming of tribal members and returning soldiers. Its movements symbolically evoke earlier journeys and homecomings, intended to "conjure old processions and returns" ("Gourd Dancer" 153).

At the centre of this religious tradition was the tai-me, regarded by the Kiowa as their principal sacred object. During the Kado, spiritual power was directed toward the tai-me, which functioned both as a source of protection and as a representation of the community's relationship with the sacred (Scott, "Religious Societies"). Although the tai-me was physically represented by a small figure with a rounded stone head covered in deerskin, its importance extended far beyond its material form. It served as an embodiment of Kiowa religious belief and was associated with the sacred power of the sun. Momaday recalls encountering the tai-me only once, yet the experience left a lasting impression on him. Although he acknowledges that he had not "grown up in the tribe," his encounter enabled him to recognize the profound cultural significance of this sacred object (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 48).

The traditional account of the tai-me further reinforces the theme of Kiowa endurance. According to the story recorded by Momaday, the sacred figure appeared to the Kiowa during their period in the Black Hills, when the people were experiencing "suffering and despair" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 10). The arrival of the tai-me offered them spiritual and material sustenance and became associated with their ability to endure hardship. Momaday's retelling of this tradition consequently presents the tai-me as more than a religious artifact: it becomes a symbol of survival, continuity, and collective resilience. By recovering such traditions through his writing and personal participation in Kiowa ceremonial life, Momaday reconnects his own identity with the historical perseverance of his ancestors:

The Kiowas came out of their, what I called somewhere the cellular memory of hopelessness. About the turn of the century, the Kiowas were defeated, depressed and hopeless. The death rate had begun to exceed the birth rate. Things couldn't have been worse, but they changed. They brought about their own survival. That's a big story. It's not only the Kiowa story of course – it's the Indian story ("Writer, Artist, and Teacher").

Momaday's commitment to recovering Kiowa heritage is evident in his effort to document and preserve traditional tribal narratives that had historically been transmitted through oral tradition. One such narrative is the Kiowa creation story presented in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. According to the traditional account, the Kiowa emerged gradually from the earth through a narrow opening in a hollow tree or log. Their emergence, however, was interrupted when a pregnant woman became caught in the opening, leaving a portion of the people behind in the subterranean world. Momaday interprets this traditional account in relation to the subsequent spiritual significance of the sun. He suggests that the Kiowa's movement from darkness into the world of light can be understood as a form of symbolic foreshadowing, since they "emerged from a sunless world" into a landscape in which the sun eventually became central to their religious consciousness (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 13). By placing his own interpretation alongside the traditional narrative, Momaday connects ancestral storytelling with his broader exploration of Kiowa spirituality and history.

Among the traditional narratives that hold particular significance for Momaday is the story of the bear and the seven sisters. This well-known Kiowa legend recounts the transformation of a young boy into a bear, after which he pursues his seven sisters. Seeking refuge, the sisters climb a tsoai, or rock tree, which rises upward and carries them into the heavens, where they become associated with the constellation of the Big Dipper (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 15). The story possesses a special personal significance for Momaday because of his Kiowa name, Tsoai-Talee, meaning "rock tree boy" ("Writer, Artist, and Teacher"). Momaday's identification with the bear figure extends beyond the literal association created by his name. Reflecting on the story, he describes himself as the "boy who turned into the bear" and associates the bear with his own "disposition" and genetic "makeup," calling it the "most important totem" in his life ("Writer, Artist, and Teacher"). The bear therefore functions as a powerful symbol through which Momaday connects personal identity with ancestral mythology. This identification is also reflected in *The Ancient Child*, where the protagonist's movement toward the bear and the spiritual world becomes part of his struggle to recover a fragmented cultural identity. Through this recurring image, Momaday transforms the traditional bear legend into a literary vehicle for exploring belonging, ancestral memory, and cultural renewal. The story ultimately reinforces his larger understanding of Kiowa resilience: cultural identity can survive historical displacement when ancestral narratives continue to be remembered, retold, and given new meaning:

From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky. Whatever they were in the mountains, they could be no more. However tenuous their well-being, however much they had suffered and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 15).

Throughout his exploration of Kiowa history and culture, Momaday repeatedly emphasizes the resilience of his people—their ability to endure suffering, survive historical disruption, and draw strength from the presence of their ancestors. This idea of collective perseverance becomes closely connected with Momaday's own search for identity. As he reconstructs the experiences of earlier generations, he increasingly identifies with their struggles and recognizes their survival as an essential part of his own cultural inheritance. Momaday's growing awareness of Kiowa traditions gradually reduces the distance he once experienced between himself and his ancestral community. One of the most meaningful ways in which he establishes this connection is through the Kiowa practice of preserving and remembering ancestral names. Within Kiowa culture, a name carries a profound sense of identity and continuity. Momaday gives particular importance to the name of his grandfather, Mammedaty, through which he attempts to preserve his ancestor's presence in the collective memory. In his poetry, he suggests that Mammedaty's "essence was and is" contained within his name ("The Gourd Dancer" 154).

The significance of a Kiowa name extends beyond its function as a personal designation. Momaday explains that a man's name is "his own" and that he may "keep it or give it away as he likes" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 43). Naming, therefore, becomes closely associated with personal identity, ancestral continuity, and cultural memory. Remembering a name also provides a means of keeping an ancestor spiritually present. According to the Kiowa tradition represented by Momaday, an individual such as Mammedaty continues to live within cultural memory when others are able to "imagine him in his name" ("The Gourd Dancer" 154). Momaday adopts this principle in his own literary practice by repeatedly invoking and preserving his grandfather's name. Through writing, Mammedaty's identity is rescued from obscurity and incorporated into the continuing story of the family and the Kiowa people.

The culmination of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is particularly significant in this respect. Momaday's physical and imaginative journey concludes at the ancestral burial ground, where his reflections on his grandfather are accompanied by a poem that invokes Mammedaty's name: "who listens here and now to hear your name" (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 108). The moment transforms the act of remembering into an intimate encounter with ancestry. Mammedaty's name thus becomes a bridge connecting the living with the dead and the present with the Kiowa past. By preserving his grandfather's name and incorporating Kiowa practices of remembrance into his literary work, Momaday demonstrates that cultural reclamation is achieved not only through the recovery of historical narratives but also through the preservation of ancestral presence. His sustained engagement with names, memory, and family history ultimately reflects his growing understanding of and connection to his Kiowa heritage.

CONCLUSION

Momaday's desire to recover and reaffirm his cultural identity serves as one of the principal impulses behind his literary work. His writing functions not only as a means of preserving Kiowa traditions but also as a space in which he examines his relationship with his ancestors and reflects upon the historical experiences that shaped them. His search for identity therefore extends beyond an attempt to understand himself as an individual in the present. Instead, he reconstructs the past from an ancestral perspective and seeks to understand the hardships, cultural practices, and resilience of the people from whom he inherited his identity. Through ancestral memory, Momaday establishes a continuity between his individual experience and the collective history of the Kiowa people. His literary project consequently becomes an act of cultural reclamation in which the past is not treated as something lost or inaccessible but as a living source of identity, knowledge, and strength. By imaginatively entering the experiences of his ancestors, Momaday transforms his personal search for belonging into a broader affirmation of Kiowa cultural continuity and resilience.

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