

LONELINESS OR THE BORDERLINE BETWEEN VOID AND SOCIETY? THE DILEMMA OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN HERO AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Ayşe Dinçer

Bosphorus University (Turkey)

One of the basic themes of the American novels written after WW II is the delineation of the struggle between the twin tendencies of the American hero: to disappear into the self or to become diffused into the society. As Tony Tanner puts it, during the last two decades, a large number of Americans have come to regard society as some kind of vast conspiracy plotting to shape individual consciousness to suit its own ends.¹ It's undeniable that American Indian novelists writing after the 50's, like white novelists of the main current (American society), have been influenced by existential implications of Dostoevsky's and Kafka's works and by those of French existentialist writers. Hence the problem of discovering or creating the self and the ways in which identity is achieved, imposed, abandoned or lost have occupied the minds of post world war American Indian novelists too. If we take into consideration the concept of the sacred unity of land-word-ceremony which underlies the American Indian culture, the Indian's quest of identity assumes a mystical dimension.

The basic American Indian belief in the spiritual bond of man, land, word and ceremony and their basically indirect relationship with white Americans may, to a certain extent, explain why American Indians haven't been as active in the civil rights struggles as Afro-Americans have been. For the American Indian, where he eats or who he votes for is not as important as the spiritual bond of man and nature. Their insistence on preserving their fishing rights is an example indicating the nature of American Indian cultural values. The protest tone, delineated in the Afro-American novels since the very beginning, is almost absent in American Indian novels. The belief that man, land, word and ceremony form a spiritual unity which brings a transcendental tone to the American Indian novel, the American Indian thought that they are the real owners of the land and that their cultural values are richer than those of the white society

spiritually impoverished by the conditions technological advances brought about, rules out the tone of protest in the American Indian novel.

While analyzing the theme of search for identity in the American Indian novel after WW II, it is necessary to examine how the cultural values and the social behavior of American Indians have influenced the stages the American Indian novel has gone through as far as form and content are concerned. Ceremony and myth are the basic ingredients of the American Indian novel. Paula Gunn Allen defines ceremony and myth as follows, «The ceremony is the ritual enactment of a specialized perception of cosmic relationships while the myth is a prose record of that relationship».² According to John G. Neinhardt, the purpose of a ceremony is integration: the individual is integrated, fused with his fellows, the community of people is fused with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one.³ Lame Deer points out that the purpose of American Indian literature is not one of pure self-expression.⁴ According to him the tribes seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories, myths and tales to embody, articulate and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things, and to actualize, in language, those truths of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity.⁵ Hence, every story, every song, every ceremony tells the Indian that he is part of a living whole, and that all parts of that whole are related to one another by virtue of their participation in the whole of being. Paula Gunn Allen says «healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole».⁶ In a way, American Indian thought is mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of mysticism. In my opinion, it will be a fair treatment if the American Indian novel is studied in the context of a psychic journey. Lame Deer says,

«...We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual ... We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the common-place are one».⁷

Arlene B. Hirschfeld, in his research on American Indian and Eskimo writers, has come to the conclusion that the first American Indian novel *Queen of the Woods* was written in 1899 by Chief Simon Pokagon. According to Charles Larson, American Indian novels written from 1899 up to our day can be classified into four groups.⁸ Into the first group fall those novels which he calls «*assimilationist novels*». They are listed as follows: Chief Simon Pokagon, *Queen of the Woods* (1899), John Milton

Oskison, *Wild Harvest* (1925) and *Black Jack Davy* (1926), Morning Dove, *The Half Blood* (1927), John Joseph Mathews, *Sundown* (1934), John Milton Oskison, *Brothers Three* (1935), Writers who fall into this group, in their novels, reflect the pain of having to endure the miserable conditions they faced on the reservations. Chief Simon Pokagon in the preface of *Queen of the Woods*, says that he had first written the novel in Algonquin, which was the only language he knew till he was fourteen years old. Then, saying that he has translated the novel into English, he expresses his sorrow that his work lost its meaning due to translation into English. To the second group goes D'Arcy Mc Nickle's *The Surrounded* (1936) and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) with which he has won the Pulitzer Prize the same year. The importance of Mc Nickle's *The Surrounded* lies in the fact that it is the first American Indian novel which deals with the theme of the search for identity but this subject is delineated within the framework of the American Indians' relations with the representatives of the federal government on the reservations. This is the period when American Indians had not yet started to live in cities in large groups. After the practice of the relocation program started, the American Indian, forced to live in cities in large groups, faced a new conflict which was greater than that caused by his relationship with the white representatives on the reservations. Now he started to be torn between his desire to return to tribal life as much as it was allowed to him on the lands allocated to him and his hopeless attempts to adapt himself to city life. N. Scott Momaday, in *House Made of Dawn*, brings up the question of the identity quest of the semi-urbanized American Indian hero. In *The Surrounded* the hero is surrounded by a few white federal government representatives who try to control his tribal habits. In *House Made of Dawn* the hero is surrounded not only by white Americans but also by the *urban system* that gradually kills the spiritual values of his tribal existence. Hence, the hero dangles between a void and the American white society.

After *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday wrote an autobiographical novel *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1976) and a book of memoirs *Names* (1977). In these two books, Momaday, against the background of American Indian myths and the concept of ceremony, casts the yearnings of an urban American Indian for the spiritual unity of land, word, ceremony in his self, which is the secret of tribal existence. About *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday says,

«The novel is about an Indian who returns from WW II and finds that he cannot recover his tribal identity; nor can he escape the cultural context in which he grew up. He is torn, as they say, between two worlds, neither of which he can enter and be a whole man. The story is that of his struggle to survive on the horns of a real and tragic dilemma in contemporary society...⁹.

Dallas Chief Eagle's *Winter Court* (1967), Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows* (1972), Denton R. Bedford's *Tsali* (1972) fall into Larson's third group. In the novels belonging to this group, writers reflect the American Indian wars from the Indian's point of view thus trying to show the other side of the coin. But the protest factor is not like that of the Wright school which is named after the Afro-American writer Richard Wright who, in his *Native Son* (1940), criticizes race discrimination from a naturalistic point of view. Indian philosophy of life and folk tradition, against which the events are cast, add a mystical dimension to these novels. For example, Hyemeyohsts Storm in *Seven Arrows* depicts the wars between Cheyennes and Whites, and the difficulties the Cheyennes faced after the wars. At the end of the novel the grandfather explains to his grandchildren the significance of the myth of seven arrows through the tale of Snow White and the seven dwarfs. Yet what he tries to affirm is that the origin of the tale of Snow White and the seven dwarfs lies in the American Indian myth of seven arrows,

«...And the paradox, my son is this. This symbol of the young maiden is multiple... 'Wow!' Grandpaw, you got to be a kidding with all that old time talk! Rocky almost laughed outloud. 'No, I'm not', the voice under the hat answered. 'It's a teaching. And there are seven arrows in the story too'. They are called dwarfs. They give away the germs of wisdom of the north to all those who understood... The name of the story is Snow White...»¹⁰.

In *Seven Arrows* events are not placed in definite periods of time and they do not follow chronological order. Thus the American Indian philosophy that the present, past and the future are part of a whole effects the form of the novel. Indian tales that embellish the plot of the novel further reflect the striking contrast between the white and the Indian culture.

«Look what the power has given to the white man! The gifts of these men overwhelm the mind! And they are a people of war! They despise peace! Yet still the power given them by the universe is a far greater medicine than ours!... 'That, my son, is one of the riddles of men', answered the chief. 'Would you listen to a story concerning man?»¹¹

Autumn's Bounty (1972) by George Pierre, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) by James Welch, *Indian's Summer* (1975) by Nasnanga, *Ceremony* (1977) by Leslie Marma Silko make up the fourth group of Larson's classification. In these novels the subject matter is the desperate search for identity of the American Indian who, through the federal government's relocation program, settles in the cities or endures the shocking effects of the policy

of taking an urban economy to the lands allocated to the Indian. The Indian here tries to prove his existence by preserving his Indian identity, that is by clinging to his past, inevitably fading into darkness. Tayo, the hero of Silko in *Ceremony*, and Abel, the hero of *House Made of Dawn*, after fighting for the U.S.A. during WW II, return to their villages but they both have lost their spiritual health. They undergo a psychological crisis due to the shocking difference between life in the army and the cities and life in their village. They can neither recover their tribal identity nor belong to the system in the cities. Tayo and Abel overcome their spiritual illness only after their recognition of the harmonious unity of land-word-ceremony. Tayo's family calls the old medicine man, Betonie, to heal Tayo's spiritual wound. After joining the healing ceremony of old Betonie, Tayo gradually remembers the words of the song of sunrise, which is the traditional Laguna song,

«He repeated the words as he remembered them, not sure if they were the right ones, but feeling they were right... The power of each day spilled over the hills in great silence. Sunrise...»¹²

Abel, after performing the traditional burial ceremony for his dead grandfather, remembers the words of the traditional song of dawn,

«He was running and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song. House made of pollen, house made of dawn.»¹³

Hence Tayo and Abel symbolically recover their Indian identity. In *Ceremony*, and *House Made of Dawn* it is implicit that the Indian will not lose his identity if he does not cut his ties with land and ceremony. N. Scott Momaday says,

«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. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it.»¹⁴

American Indian novels written after WW II present Indian heroes who are torn by the conflicts aroused due to immense differences between the cultural values of the white society and those of their own. These heroes can endure this painful experience through adhering to their racial consciousness and identity. Some heroes like Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* or Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*, on the verge of spiritual

death, return to life through resuscitation of the spiritual unity of land, word, ceremony in their minds thus affirming their Indian consciousness and identity in isolation. Of course the first question that comes to one's mind is «how long can they stay in isolation?» The implication expected from these novels is a return to the world outside after the hibernation period is over just as the hero in Ellison's *Invisible Man* suggests. On the other hand heroes like Tosamah in *House Made of Dawn* who are called «New Indians» by Stan Steiner¹⁵ and who have grown up and got educated in the city, try to establish a balance between their Indian identity and the values of the white society. Hence they try to live, as Lionel Trilling puts it, «a real life apart from the group.»¹⁶ Yet they try to exist as actual persons not only at the center of society but on its margins. In other words, they choose the borderline between loneliness and society.

Notes

1. Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York, 1971) p. 427.
2. Paula Gunn Allen, «The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature» *Literature of the American Indians*, ed. by Abraham Chopman, (New York, 1975) p. 112.
3. John G. Neinhardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, 1968) p. 33.
4. John Fire (Lame Deer), Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* (New York, 1972), p. 77.
5. John Fire (Lame Deer) *Ibid.*, p. 79.
6. Paula Gunn Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
7. John Fire (Lame Deer) *op. cit.* p. 78.
8. Charles Larson, *American Indian Fiction* (Albuquerque, 1978) p. 9.
9. N. Scott Momaday, «There Sketches from 'House Made of Dawn'», *Southern Review* (Vol. 2, 1966) p. 933.
10. Hyemeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrows* (New York, 1972) p. 371.
11. *Ibid.* p. 67.
12. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New Jersey, 1978) pp. 189-190.
13. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York, 1966) pp. 209, 210.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Stan Steiner, *The New Indians* (New York, 1968).
16. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (London, 1966) p. 72.