

THE MYTHOPOETICS OF IDENTITY IN N. SCOTT MOMADAY: THE BEAR-BOY MYTH FROM "THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN" TO "THE ANCIENT CHILD"

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Annotation:

The concept of identity in the literature of indigenous peoples is inseparable from myth, which functions not merely as a record of the past but as an active model through which a protagonist — and, through him, the people as a whole — comes to recognise itself in the present. This paper traces the fate of a single Kiowa myth, the tale of a boy transformed into a bear, across two works by N. Scott Momaday written two decades apart: the ethnographic-lyrical collage *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and the novel *The Ancient Child* (1989). It is argued that the transformation of one and the same mythic material from an ethnohistorical record into a full psychological plot reflects an evolution in Momaday's own artistic strategy of constructing identity, moving from documentation of oral tradition toward its authorial re-creation.

Keywords:

mythopoeitics, identity, N. Scott Momaday, bear-boy myth, The Way to Rainy Mountain, The Ancient Child, Kiowa mythology, indigenous literature, comparative literary studies.

Myth remains one of the most stable devices through which the literature of small, colonised or postcolonial peoples constructs national identity, precisely because myth allows a text to move beyond static description toward the demonstration of a living, still-operative pattern of self-recognition. In N. Scott Momaday's body of work this function of myth can be observed with unusual clarity in the case of a single narrative — the Kiowa legend of a boy who is transformed into a bear — which recurs twice, separated by almost twenty years, first as part of the documentary-lyrical collage *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and later as the structural and thematic core of the novel *The Ancient Child*.

The myth in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. In this earlier book the myth is presented briefly, voiced by the narrator's grandmother, and reads as a direct citation of oral tradition: eight children — seven sisters and a brother — are playing together when the boy suddenly loses the power of speech, drops to all fours, and is transformed, his fingers becoming claws and his body covered in fur. The terrified sisters run to a tree stump, which comes alive and begins to grow upward, lifting them beyond the bear's reach; the enraged animal claws at the trunk (an act the legend uses to explain the vertical grooves on the rock formation known as Devils Tower), while the sisters themselves ascend into the sky and become the stars of the Big Dipper. Within the architecture of the book, the myth performs two distinct functions. It is aetiological, in that it explains the origin of a specific, physically visible landscape feature and of a constellation, thereby anchoring mythic time to a real, geographically locatable place that the narrator deliberately visits during his pilgrimage. And it is genealogical: from this moment on, in the author's own words, "the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky" — the myth literally institutes

a cosmic kinship for the people, extending the widest possible circle of Kiowa identity from clan, to tribe, to the stars themselves.

The transformation of the myth in *The Ancient Child*. Two decades later the same narrative material becomes the foundation of a psychological novel. The protagonist of *The Ancient Child*, the painter Locke Setman ("Set"), raised far from the reservation by an adoptive father, returns for his grandmother's funeral and finds himself drawn into the legend of the bear-boy, which now becomes directly entangled with his own biography rather than remaining a completed story from a distant past. The mysterious young woman Grey, gifted with visionary insight, functions in the novel as a mediator between Set's contemporary world and the archaic mythic layer, occupying a structural position analogous to that of the living tree stump in the original myth, which mediates between the sisters and the sky. Crucially, myth in the novel no longer explains something that has already happened; instead, it anticipates a transformation that the protagonist himself has yet to undergo. Set, a man deliberately "raised far from the reservations," undergoes a symbolic process of transformation in which myth functions not as a monument to the past but as an active model of psychological change for a de-ethnicised modern subject in search of a way back to identity.

Two modes of a single myth: document and novel. The comparison of the two versions allows us to distinguish two distinct artistic modes in which myth participates in the construction of identity. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, myth is fixed as collective property: it is voiced by the grandmother, tied to a specific place and natural phenomenon, and embedded in the book's characteristic triadic structure (myth — ethnographic-historical commentary — personal reminiscence); myth here remains primarily an object of respectful documentation. In *The Ancient Child*, the same material becomes properly fictional: myth is psychologised, transposed into the narrative present, and given a new, invented protagonist for whom transformation into a bear is not an ancestral memory but a personal, existential experience. It is significant that this shift — from documenting myth to re-creating it — coincides chronologically with the broader trajectory of Momaday's career: the further the writer moves from strictly ethnographic writing, the more freely he treats mythic material, turning it into an instrument of psychological rather than purely custodial cultural analysis. Both texts nonetheless preserve a common core: the idea that the boundary between human and animal, between clan and cosmos, is permeable, and that identity is not a fixed, once-and-for-all condition but a transformation, always potentially reversible and ongoing.

In conclusion, the fate of the bear-boy myth in Momaday's oeuvre demonstrates that the mythopoetics of identity is not, for this author, a static device: a myth first recorded as an ethnohistorical document acquires, two decades later, a new life within the novel form, becoming a model for the psychological transformation of a contemporary protagonist. This observation substantially enriches the broader picture of the artistic construction of identity in Momaday's work and opens a productive avenue for further comparison of this narrative with the mythological and legendary strata of T. Kayipbergenov's trilogy.

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