

Personal and Collective Memory in N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

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Abstract

N. Scott Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain intricately explores the cultural heritage of the Kiowa people through a blend of history, storytelling, and personal reflection. Rooted in the rich oral tradition of Native Americans, the narrative journey transcends landscapes, delving into time, memory, and communal consciousness. The research paper focuses on Momaday's masterful interplay between personal and collective memory, unveiling the intricate relationship within the narrative. Through personal reminiscence, readers are intimately connected to the author's journey and the timeless quest for identity, while collective memory saturates the narrative with the wisdom and ancestral voices of the Kiowa people.

Keywords: Storytelling, memory, collective memory, personal memory, Native identity

N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a compelling literary work that weaves together history, storytelling, and personal reflection to explore the cultural heritage of the Kiowa people. Reverberating with the rich tapestry oral tradition of Native Americans, the book delivers a distinctive narrative journey that deeply connects with readers on intellectual and emotional fronts. It is a journey not only across landscapes but also through time, memory, and the collective consciousness of a community. The narrative structure itself mirrors the process of remembering, as the author seamlessly blends personal recollections with cultural myths and historical accounts.

One of the central themes that emerge from Momaday's masterful storytelling is the interplay between personal and collective memory. This research paper aims to delve into N. Scott Momaday's portrayal of memory in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. It specifically explores how Momaday intertwines individual recollections with the broader tapestry of the Kiowa people's history and culture. By delving into these intersections, the paper seeks to unveil the intricate relationship between personal and collective memory within the narrative.

Viewed through the lens of personal reminiscence, Momaday graciously welcomes readers, plunging them into his unique journey and

inner musings, forging an intimate connection with the narrative. These individual anecdotes connect yesteryears and the present, granting us a glimpse into both the author's unique journey and the timeless quest for identity and belonging. In juxtaposition, the collective memory saturates the narrative with the wisdom, myths, and ancestral voices of the Kiowa people. These communal recollections are intricately woven into the narrative's fabric, uniting past generations with the present and serving as a poignant reminder of the cultural ties that bind communities together.

As we explore the dichotomy between personal and collective memory in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, we uncover how Momaday's artful blending of these dimensions not only enriches the narrative but also offers profound insights into the power of storytelling to shape individual identity and preserve cultural heritage. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring significance of memory in literature and the ways in which it bridges the gap between the individual and the collective, the past and the present. "It is a brilliant example of Momaday's skill at rebuilding oral tradition through snatches of both historical and personal memory. The study of this book will enable us to uncover the functioning of strategies which, when applied to fiction, lead the reader to the world of "magical realism"(Garrait-Bourrier 2).

Memory holds immense significance in literature across cultures, serving as a vehicle for exploring identity, history, and the human experience. In the context of Native American storytelling and cultural preservation, memory takes on even greater importance due to its role in transmitting traditions, preserving heritage, and connecting individuals to their ancestral roots.

For many Native American cultures, storytelling is a central means of transmitting knowledge, values, and history across generations. Oral tradition involves passing down stories, myths, and narratives through spoken word, ensuring that cultural heritage remains alive and relevant. Memory plays a pivotal role in this process, as storytellers rely on their recall of narratives to share them with new audiences. Through memory, these narratives are perpetuated and preserved, fostering a strong sense of cultural continuity.

Memory in Native American literature is also intimately tied to cultural preservation. As external forces and historical events impact Native communities, memory becomes a tool for maintaining cultural identity and resisting assimilation. By recalling stories, traditions, and historical accounts, individuals and communities reinforce their connection to their ancestors and assert their unique cultural values. Memory acts as a bridge between the past and the present, affirming Native identities and empowering individuals to navigate changing times while staying grounded in their heritage.

Memory in Native American literature often extends to the land and nature. Many indigenous cultures view their relationship with the land as a vital component of their identity. Memory helps individuals recall the ways in which their ancestors interacted with the environment, from hunting to spiritual practices. This connection between memory, land, and nature underscores the holistic worldview of many Native cultures.

Memory in Native American literature also addresses the challenges faced by these communities, such as forced displacement, cultural suppression, and the loss of traditions. Writers often explore how memory becomes a tool for resilience, resistance, and healing. By remembering past injustices and victories, individuals draw strength from their cultural history, fostering a sense of unity and determination to overcome adversity.

In Native American literature, memory fosters a sense of communal belonging. As stories are shared and retold, individuals within the community recognize shared experiences and emotions. This shared memory creates a sense of solidarity and intergenerational connection, emphasizing the collective nature of Native cultures.

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday masterfully presents and contrasts personal and collective memory to illuminate the intricate interplay between individual experiences and communal heritage. Momaday’s narrative blends his own memories and reflections with the broader cultural memory of the Kiowa people, demonstrating how personal recollections intersect with shared traditions to shape both personal identity and the collective consciousness of a community. “Momaday’s belief in the transforming capabilities of the imagination, in the synthesizing potential of memory, in the identity inducing possibilities of the land, and in the power, beauty, and grace of the word, all find their way into *The Way to Rainy Mountain*” (Wong 15).

Throughout the narrative, Momaday seamlessly integrates his personal memories and experiences, inviting readers into his world. He recounts his grandmother Aho, childhood encounters, and journey to Rainy Mountain, infusing the narrative with intimacy and emotional resonance. These personal moments humanize the narrative, providing a relatable entry point for readers while showcasing the individual’s role as a bearer of memory.

In contrast, Momaday interweaves the collective memory of the Kiowa people using myths, legends, and folktales. These elements transcend the individual and connect to a broader cultural tapestry. By sharing the tales of the Kiowa’s migration, their reverence for Rainy Mountain, and the significance of ritual practices, Momaday emphasizes the continuity of cultural memory across generations.

Through these juxtapositions, Momaday underscores the dynamic relationship between personal and collective memory. He portrays how the

personal experiences of individuals contribute to the fabric of cultural memory, and how this collective memory, in turn, enriches the significance of personal recollections. In this intricate interplay, individual narratives gain broader meaning and cultural context, while collective memory gains a deeply personal and emotional dimension.

Additionally, Momaday’s narrative framework reflects the spiral essence of memory. His skillful interplay between past and present, personal and communal, echoes the rhythmic, spiral nature of stories found in indigenous traditions. This circular structure resonates with the concept that memory does not progress in a straight line but it is a perpetual loop, reinforcing the notion that the past always maintains its vitality and relevance in all times.

N. Scott Momaday draws from his personal memories and experiences to infuse the narrative with intimacy, emotion, and authenticity in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. These instances offer readers a glimpse into the author’s own journey and contribute to the richness of the storytelling. In an interview Momaday emphasized, “Language is so creative in itself, it is intrinsically so powerful that storytellers, people who use language, are in possession of a great power. When the storyteller tells his listener a story, he creates his listener, he creates a story. He creates himself in the process. It’s an entirely creative process” (Givens 81). For instance, Momaday’s describes his grandmother Aho as a central figure in his childhood, and his recollections are filled with warmth and reverence. Through personal anecdotes and sensory details, he brings her character to life: “Her house stood in a small yard full of flowers and little trees. I remember that yard, a place of long grass and sunlight.”

These memories of his grandmother evoke a deep sense of connection and familial love, offering readers a glimpse into the author’s personal relationships and emotional experiences.

Similarly, Momaday shares memories of his childhood, where imagination and wonder played a significant role. He recalls the “tales of wonder” that his grandmother told him and his fascination with stories: “The old stories are the real things and I still believe them.” These memories of his formative years underscore the power of storytelling and the enduring impact of the stories he heard as a child. Furthermore, as the narrative follows Momaday’s physical and emotional journey to Rainy Mountain, he draws on personal memories to provide vivid descriptions of the landscape and his feelings. He reflects on his emotions during the journey:

“I did not think then that I would ever be away. A little while and I would return.” His personal reflections reveal his emotional connection to the place and his anticipation of reuniting with his cultural heritage. Throughout the narrative, Momaday incorporates sensory details and visual memories that reflect his personal experiences. For example, while describing Rainy

Mountain, he evokes a vivid image: “There are flat mesas and round hills and deep draws, valleys and deep canyons and everything on the earth stands still.” These visual and sensory memories create a sensory-rich reading experience, wherein readers immerse in author’s perceptions and emotions.

Momaday also skilfully incorporates collective memory into *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by weaving oral tradition, myths, and storytelling throughout the narrative. These elements serve as vehicles for transmitting cultural history, values, and beliefs, connecting past generations with the present ones and underscoring the enduring significance of the Kiowa people’s collective memory. Momaday echoes the act of storytelling as it has been passed down through generations. By presenting the book as a blend of prose and poetry, he simulates the oral performance of tales. For instance, the section titled “The Setting Out” reads like a traditional oral account, drawing readers into the collective memory of the Kiowa people’s journey: “In the beginning was Tepeu. Then came Gucumatz, Heart of Heaven, Creator and Maker. They consulted among themselves and with each other they created the earth...” By embracing the rhythm and repetition characteristic of oral storytelling, Momaday transports readers into the realm of collective memory, inviting them to engage with the same narratives that have been shared within the community for generations.

Momaday incorporates myths and legends as integral components of collective memory. He narrates stories that encompass creation, migration, and cultural origins, reflecting the cosmology and worldview of the Kiowa people. These myths are not presented as mere folklore; they are foundational to the cultural identity of the Kiowa community. The story of the Sun Dance, for instance, underscores the significance of rituals and communal practices: “In the old days the Sun Dance was held every summer, when the moon was full. It was a time of heat and season and ceremony.” Through the inclusion of such myths, Momaday connects readers with the ancestral memory that forms the bedrock of Kiowa heritage.

Momaday’s storytelling weaves together personal anecdotes, historical accounts, and cultural myths in a seamless manner. This interconnectedness reflects the holistic nature of collective memory, where personal experiences intertwine with shared history. The narrative invites readers to navigate between different layers of memory, creating a sense of immersion in the Kiowa cultural consciousness.

Through the fusion of oral tradition, myths, and storytelling, Momaday demonstrates that collective memory is not static but a living entity that continues to evolve through each retelling. By honouring these traditions, he preserves the richness of Kiowa heritage and enables readers to experience the resonance of collective memory firsthand.

Through the retelling of myths and stories, Momaday links the present narrative to the historical experiences of the Kiowa people. These

narratives serve as portals that transport readers across time, enabling them to witness events from the past as if they were unfolding in the present. For instance, in recounting the Kiowa migration, Momaday’s narrative resonates with a sense of immediacy: “From the land of the dawn... they came to the center of the world... In the twinkling of an eye they were on Rainy Mountain.” By presenting historical events as living moments, Momaday establishes a connection between the present narrative and the collective memory of the Kiowa people.

The myths and stories shared in the narrative are not mere anecdotes; they represent the cultural heritage and identity of the Kiowa community. Momaday delves into the creation stories, migration accounts, and ritual practices that define the Kiowa worldview. By including these narratives, he affirms their significance in shaping the cultural consciousness and values of the Kiowa people. For example, the narrative of the Sun Dance is emblematic of Kiowa spirituality and communal bonding. By narrating this ritual, Momaday highlights its role in reinforcing social cohesion and reflecting the enduring spiritual connections of the Kiowa people to the land: “It was a time of heat and season and ceremony. It was a time of renewal.”

The intergenerational transmission of stories is central to collective memory. Through storytelling, myths, and oral tradition, the Kiowa people pass down their history, values, and beliefs from one generation to the next. Momaday’s inclusion of these elements reflects the ongoing process of sharing knowledge and shaping cultural identity. Incorporating these elements into the narrative reinforces the idea that stories are not static but continually evolve as they are retold and interpreted by new generations. Momaday becomes a conduit for this transmission, sharing the collective memory of the Kiowa people through his own voice and perspective.

By threading these elements through the narrative, Momaday emphasizes the vital role of intergenerational storytelling in preserving cultural heritage. He invites readers to join in this process of memory transmission, thereby ensuring that the stories of the Kiowa people remain alive and relevant for years to come. In this way, the present narrative becomes a living vessel that carries the echoes of the remote past into the future.

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday skillfully weaves moments where personal and collective memory intersect, revealing the intricate relationship between individual experiences and broader cultural themes. These intersections illuminate how Momaday’s personal memories mirror and connect to the collective memory of the Kiowa people, underscoring the complexity of memory’s role in shaping both individual and cultural identities. One striking intersection occurs when Momaday describes his grandmother Aho’s voice: “The old woman’s voice was like a voice from the grave. ... I shall never forget that voice. It was the voice of my grandmother”

(63). Here, Momaday’s personal memory of his grandmother’s voice carries broader cultural resonance. Aho’s voice becomes echo of the ancestral voices that resound through collective memory. Momaday’s individual experience of hearing his grandmother’s voice becomes a connector to the collective memory of generations past. This intersection highlights how personal relationships and memories are interwoven with cultural heritage, reflecting the intricate interplay between the individual and the community.

Momaday’s personal journey intersects with the collective memory of the Kiowa people’s migration. He recounts the Kiowa’s migration story, connecting it to his personal journey: “They came down from the north... and the first place on earth that they knew was Rainy Mountain” (79).

Momaday’s journey to Rainy Mountain mirrors the migration of his ancestors, aligning his personal experience with the broader cultural narrative. This intersection emphasizes the profound connection between individual journeys and communal history. It reveals how memory shapes not only individual identities but also of the community. Moments where Momaday recalls his childhood fascination with stories and myths highlight the role of storytelling in shaping both personal and cultural memory. He writes: “The old stories are the real things and I still believe them.” Here, Momaday’s personal belief in the authenticity of stories mirrors the collective belief in the significance of myths. The intersection of his individual conviction with broader cultural values demonstrates how stories transcend individual experiences to become pillars of collective memory. This intersection also reveals the enduring power of stories to shape both individual and cultural identities.

These intersections between personal and collective memory underscore the intricate interdependence of these dimensions. Momaday’s personal experiences act as entry points into the broader cultural narratives, and the collective memory enriches the significance of his individual recollections. Through these intersections, the narrative demonstrates that memory is a dynamic force that shapes not only individual identities but also the cultural tapestry that binds communities together.

The landscape, particularly Rainy Mountain, functions as a powerful conduit that channels both personal and collective memory. The physical environment becomes a trigger for memories, serving as a repository of experiences and a mirror for both individual and communal recollections. This dynamic interaction between the landscape and memory underscores the interconnectedness of personal and cultural identities. Rainy Mountain is a symbolically charged location that holds deep cultural significance for the Kiowa people. As Momaday describes the mountain’s prominence in the landscape, it becomes a focal point that embodies both personal and collective memory. Rainy Mountain represents a physical anchor for Momaday’s

personal journey and serves as a touchstone for the Kiowa people's cultural heritage.

Throughout the narrative, the physical environment triggers memories, allowing Momaday to connect his personal experiences with broader cultural themes. When Momaday visits Rainy Mountain, he reflects on his grandmother and the stories she told: “I remember her most distinctly against the sky, her head thrown back, her voice upraised in the hot sunlight...” “For Native American people (and especially for Momaday himself), mental, emotional, and spiritual phenomena occur in connection with powerful visual phenomena, including external objects and internal pictures in the mind’s eye” (Rainwater 377). The landscape of Rainy Mountain becomes a catalyst for memories of his grandmother, intertwining personal recollections with the broader tapestry of the Kiowa people’s oral tradition. The mountain acts as a conduit that evokes a sense of connection to both personal and collective history. Rainy Mountain also triggers memories related to collective experiences and rituals of the Kiowa people. As Momaday describes the Sun Dance: “It was a time of heat and season and ceremony. It was a time of renewal.”

The landscape of Rainy Mountain becomes a backdrop for the collective memory of communal rituals. These memories reflect the shared experiences of the Kiowa people, emphasizing the importance the physical environment in fostering cultural continuity. The landscape’s evocative power allows Momaday to intersect personal and collective memory. His journey mirrors the broader migration tale of the Kiowa people. As he walks the same paths like his ancestors, his personal experience becomes a conduit that aligns with the collective memory of the Kiowa community.

The landscape’s role in triggering memories underscores the interconnectedness of individual and communal experiences. Memories linked with the land become woven into the fabric of cultural heritage, enriching both personal and collective identities. The landscape is not only a physical backdrop but a living embodiment of memory in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Rainy Mountain becomes a conduit between personal and collective experiences, reflecting the layered nature of memory's role in shaping both individual and cultural identities.

Momaday’s narrative emphasizes the important role of preserving cultural heritage through memory. By interweaving myths, oral tradition, and personal recollections, he showcases the continuing significance of the traditional stories in maintaining the Kiowa cultural identity. The act of retelling and passing down stories becomes a form of resistance against cultural erasure and assimilation. Momaday's exploration of memory becomes an important message to all that the preservation of traditions and practices that define Native communities. The theme of memory contributes to the narrative’s exploration of identity. Momaday’s personal memories and

experiences, combined with collective memory, shape his understanding of self within the broader context of the Kiowa people. His journey to Rainy Mountain and his engagement with cultural narratives lead to a deeper connection to his heritage. This underscores the interconnectedness of individual and communal identities, as personal recollections become threads in the tapestry of a larger cultural story.

Memory serves as a bridge that spans generations, connecting the past to the present. Momaday’s portrayal of collective memory reveals how the Kiowa people’s stories and traditions persist across time. The narrative’s cyclical structure, mirroring oral tradition, emphasizes the idea that memory transcends linear time. The act of remembering becomes a means of honouring those who came before while ensuring their legacy endures into the future. The theme of memory in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* has broader significance in Native American literature. Across various Native cultures, memory and storytelling play central roles in cultural transmission. Oral tradition, myths, and collective memory are essential vehicles for preserving and conveying cultural values, history, and spirituality. Momaday’s exploration of memory aligns with a larger tradition of Native storytelling that aims to sustain Native identity in the face of historical challenges.

In a broader literary context, Momaday’s narrative stands as a testament to the power of storytelling as a means of cultural survival and resilience. The theme of memory echoes throughout Native American literature, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural heritage and asserting identity. Through *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday contributes to this tradition by demonstrating how memory’s interplay between personal and collective dimensions illuminates the past, shapes the present, and guides the future. “Momaday assert major theme of this and many of his other works: the power of the oral tradition rests its ability to preserve the essence of a people, their concept of themselves” (Charles 64).

Through Momaday’s portrayal, it becomes clear that memory is a dynamic force that transcends time and bridges personal and collective realms. Personal memories, such as those of his grandmother Aho’s voice, intersect with broader cultural narratives, mirroring the enduring echoes of ancestral voices. These intersections mirror the Kiowa migration, the power of rituals, and the authenticity of stories, illustrating how personal experiences contribute to and enrich the collective memory of the Kiowa people. Momaday’s exploration of memory enriches readers’ understanding of the Kiowa cultural heritage by immersing them in a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. By experiencing Momaday’s memories, readers gain insights into the emotional, familial, and spiritual dimensions of the Kiowa experience. Simultaneously, through collective memory, readers witness the cultural tapestry woven from generations of stories, rituals, and shared experiences.

The portrayal of memory in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* extends beyond the narrative itself, resonating with broader insights about memory's role in culture. Memory is not merely a static repository of the past; rather, memory is a living entity that shapes identities, fosters cultural continuity, and offers a strong connect between the individual and the community. Just as Momaday weaves memory into his narrative, authors across cultures weave memory into the fabric of their stories, reminding us that the protection of cultural heritage is integral to understanding the complexities of human existence. In this way, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* invites readers to reflect on their own relationship with memory, inviting them to explore how their personal experiences intersect with broader cultural narratives. Momaday's masterful storytelling serves as a powerful reminder that memory is not just a facet of literature and culture, but a fundamental part of what it means to be human.

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