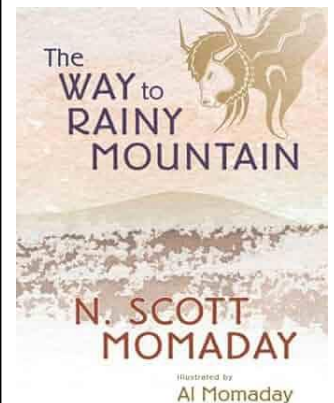


"Folklore and the Anthropocene": A Review of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, by Scott Momaday**Samantha Robin Christopher**

Lecturer

Graduate English Department, Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore

Mail id: samantharobinchristopher18@gmail.com | Orcid: [0009-0002-9588-1156](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9588-1156)**Bibliographic Information:****Name of the Book:** *The Way to Rainy Mountain***Author:** N. Scott Momaday**Publisher:** University of New Mexico Press**Language:** English**ISBN:** ISBN 978-0-8263-0436-0**Price:** Rs. 3,444 /-**INTRODUCTION**

*"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."*ⁱ

- Scott Momaday

Native American folklore has dwelt on the communal self, where Indigenous memoirs visibly depict how individual and communal histories are unavoidably correlated. The voices of myth, history and memory in each chapter are seamlessly interwoven, transforming this oral tradition into a rich written tapestry. Momaday intertwines fact and fiction by linking the mythical, cultural, historical and personal through a literary tracing of Kiowa migration. The usage of multiple voices and the style of oral composition in his memoir allows for a more layered comprehension of the Kiowan consciousness.

The way of life and cultural history of the Kiowa tribe is deeply embedded in its food, language and religion, which is profoundly reflected in their oral tradition that is passed down from generation to generation. This bicultural composite narrative¹ contains representations of culture that are all controlled by a system governed by biopolitics within the American subcontinent. This is a reference to the political apparatuses that dominate social structures, be they ideological or repressive. Power dynamics between the

¹ Bicultural composite composition refers to the creation of something new by blending elements from two distinct cultures. This can manifest in various forms, like literature.

coloniser and the colonised shift, resulting in a bio-social hierarchy, thereby giving rise to an imbalance in the socialisation process that aims to preserve and extend the empire.

So, the subversive and resistant vernacular expression by way of song, story and oral tradition of the Kiowan cultural ethos challenges Eurocentric metanarratives steeped in Orientalist practices. These oral forms are visceral, artistic, and authentic, offering a powerful counter-narrative to colonial hegemony. The memoir juxtaposes the cultural reality of the Kiowa tribe with Western modernity, unveiling the Native American existence in an era transitioning and consumed by industrialism and innovation.

CONTEXT

The indigenous way of life as a more sustainable practice of living shows that Humankind's impact on nature has made this ecological epoch one of precarity. The accelerating intensity of urbanisation and civilisation has made the ecosystem more susceptible to damage. It has made the collective masses more desensitised to the destruction of the natural environment in the age of the Anthropocene. This memoir explores the effects of colonial displacement in tribal native American communities as an outcome and consequence of British colonisation. The impact of Western culture is visible despite native resistance to altering and amalgamating native traditions with Western religious and political ideologies. During decolonisation, the Kiowa community transitioned from colonial domination to co-existing with its natural environment. This piece of folklore discovers sentiments in Native American mythology that are peculiarly and uniquely multicultural and pantheistic. The narrative is an ode to Momaday's Grandmother Aho as much as it is to preserving oral tradition. This tradition is about passing down culture, history and stories generation after generation through the spoken word.

ANALYSIS

The memoir is highly metaphorical and symbolic in the tone it exudes, which gushes with intense eloquence and colloquialism specific to the Kiowan community. One cannot ignore the facet of the sign and the signifier in this memoir and how tastefully it draws the audience with its magnetic articulation, where the author's gravitas is reflected in this narrative's mimesis. While the memoir presents itself artistically and sensitively, which makes up for the absence of a stream of consciousness and characterisation, the author's insights into his own life leave the reader grasping for more.

The reader will notice the blend of history and local folklore woven into this chronicle, including several origin myths that rationalise the origin of the tribe, much like Adam and Eve, for instance. Or how, as a people, they are protected by their ancestors, who are believed to be constellations in the sky. This memoir is an account of a journey of hundreds of miles that spanned many generations, and like every epic journey, it starts with a single step. This memoir amalgamates historical events and the subjective personal memory of the incidents that took place when the U.S. military displaced the native American tribe in the late 1860s. The individual experience transforms into the political here.

The author embarks on a journey that traces back to the migration of the Kiowa tribe from Yellowstone River eastward to the Black Hills and ultimately south to Wichita Mountains, Oklahoma, where a knoll marked by the harsh weather enveloped in rains, blizzards, and tornados is celebrated with an evocative moniker- Rainy Mountain. The climate and the wilting flora cast a sense of alienation over the land that could symbolise

the tribe's loss of identity. Since warfare was a matter of disposition and not survival for the Kiowa tribe, it was not uncommon to witness rivalry between clans. Yet, as they traversed through the wilderness, Kiowans enlisted the help of fellow native tribes like the Comanches to reach their destination.

Cut to the Summer of 1879; this may be recorded as the date of disappearance of the Buffalo from the Kiowa country. Thenceforth the appearance of even a single animal was a rare event. ⁱⁱ (Momaday 67) This tug of war between man and nature is illustrated in the memoir as a battle of brawn between a buffalo and an archer. These stories embody the desire of the tribe and nature, how they both yearn for a restored biodiversity as nature fights back and emerges victorious, if only in the realm of imagination. Momaday explores the historical experience with the use of the imaginative realm. And even in the imaginative dimension, that is a direct depiction of Kiowan culture, wherein the pervasiveness of misogyny cannot be evaded. Women who are considered "bad" or "immoral" are stringently dealt with for the most minor offences.

Much akin to patriarchy, the Kiowa clan could hardly escape cultural imperialism, the pleasures of which the coloniser basked in. As a result of this hegemony², various dispositifs³ were employed to engulf and transmute the Kiowan way of life, which gradually faded away and gave way to the prevalence of Western religious practices. The once potent Indigenous ethos eventually led to the triumph of predominant culture as an ideological base, as seen in the gripping account of Aho, Momaday's grandmother, who changed her last name from Mammedaty to Momaday as a way of adopting Christian naming conventions.

Still, the humanity and identity of the Kiowa tribe persist, and its ways are not entirely lost but idle in the background. The landscape and terrain of one knoll of the Wichita Mountains, whose nom de plume came to be Rainy Mountain, reflects and symbolises the strength, toughness and fortitude of the Kiowan people. As Momaday's words come to life, one must pay attention to the significance of each signifying element in his narrative. The foreshadowing of events to come, allow us to anticipate struggle and recognise the Kiowans' ability to overcome. Through the penning down of the Kiowan oral tradition, it is discernible that the journey of a thousand miles isn't just a journey but a pilgrimage with spiritual demands that beckons the tribe to their new home. Legend and myth become interfused with memory, which allows for an exploration of varied origin myths that could surpass even the most captivating bedtime story through its vivid imagery and masterful rhetoric.

The aforementioned continuous and recurring displacement and migration of the Kiowa tribe results in an alteration of biodiversity within the disputed native American geographical territory. The leading causes of loss of biodiversity are land use change and overexploitation of resources. There is a desecration of the hallowed ground which the Kiowan community called their own. This results directly in an imbalance of nature and geographical conditions, even though the Indigenous community engages in sustainable practices that are intertwined with a collective environmentally conservational consciousness that preserves the ecosystem.

The involuntary relocation resulted in the loss of connection to their land, flora, fauna and other resources. The Buffalo, in particular, was a vital part of the Sun-dance ritual and served as a sacred cultural symbol of the tribe's connection to the Sun. The tragic near-extinction of the Buffalo before the migration was

² Control by a dominant group. (political, social, etc.) in this case, the western coloniser.

³ Machinery, device, or tool of power. (See Foucault's "The Confession of the Flesh" 1977)

caused by a colonial strategic agenda to subjugate and destabilise the native way of life. In the face of adversity and famine, they were left with no other choice than to rely heavily on Buffalo for sustenance during their forced migration, resulting in the complete extinction of the Buffalo.ⁱⁱⁱ (HÄMÄLÄINEN 3) Therefore, the 'Great Buffalo Massacre' was indeed a result of colonial military strategy.^{iv} (*Great American Buffalo Slaughter* | EBSCO, n.d., p. 1)

This resulted in the persistent relocation from period to period, which is bound to result in land use change that diversely affects the biodiversity of an ecological system in terms of less vegetation diversity and leads to further extinction and environmental degradation. Yet, the human spirit endures through the "collective unconsciousness"⁴ of the tribe that remains persistent despite strife, turmoil and loss within the significant healing Tai-me ritual that is an embodiment of the ethereal and mystical.

CONCLUSION

*Nothing moves, and it does not occur to you to make any sound. Something is going on there in the shadows.
Everything has slowed to a stop in order that the Sun might take leave of the land.^v*

- Scott Momaday

This book does not just explore the linear trajectory of historical events; it alternates between memories of the author's grandmother and Kiowan mythology, anecdotes, and indigenous wisdom. The memoir is an experience in itself that cannot be fully savoured until there is a subjective affective interaction between the reader and the text. Momaday proves to be a Wordsmith in this endeavour, like all his other writing, which gives us a profound sense of the metaphysical in very concrete terms.

In this profound and poignant narrative, one is led through a compelling catharsis of the author, where every anecdote, legend, or reminiscence of the past evokes a specific emotive response. Digressing to an eco-critical point of view, Momaday has given the contemporary critic the opportunity to delve into the timeless struggle of Humankind vs. nature that is relevant even today. Since we live in the age of the Anthropocene, this memoir offers lessons and sheds light on Humankind's unstable relationship with Mother Nature and urges us to be wary of the implications of neo-colonialism and the aftereffects of annexation and destruction of Indigenous land as well as forced displacement on the environment.

ⁱ Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

ⁱⁱ Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

ⁱⁱⁱ HÄMÄLÄINEN, PEKKA. "THE FIRST PHASE OF DESTRUCTION: KILLING THE SOUTHERN PLAINS BUFFALO, 1790-1840." *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2001, pp. 101–14. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23533186>. Accessed 17 June 2025. Page 3.

^{iv} *Great American Buffalo Slaughter* | EBSCO. (n.d.). EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com.
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/great-american-buffalo-slaughter>

^v Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

⁴A universal, inherited layer of the unconscious mind shared by all humans. It's a shared inheritance from our ancestors, influencing our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.