CHAPTER IV

FROM DESPONDENCY TO ONENESS WITH ‘NATURE’:

SPIRITUAL REGENERATION OF SET

This chapter charts the journey of how an artist retraces his steps back to humanity after having been trapped in alienation and depression. He passes through three stages – prosperity and fame, mental breakdown and regeneration of his whole being, the third forming the plot of the novel. Momaday has adopted the device of multiple narrative voices in The Ancient Child. The major part of the story is narrated by an omniscient narrator and the rest by Set and Grey. The author has also employed the stream of consciousness technique. A brief account of the plot is given below.

The novel starts with the prologue, the “Kiowa story of Tsoai.” The story is about the seven sisters and their brother. While they were playing together, the boy suddenly metamorphosed into a bear, and the sisters ran and climbed up the stump of a tree. The tree stump grew up to the sky rescuing the girls. The bear climbed up after them in vain leaving claw marks on the tree. Later the tree trunk petrified forming a large monolith, which was named the Rock Tree or Tsoai or the Devil’s Tower, an important landmark and a sacred site in Kiowa history. The seven sisters formed the seven stars in the Big Dipper constellation.

Locke Setman, called Set by his fellow beings, is put in an orphanage when he is seven years old owing to the death of his parents in an accident. From there, Set is adopted by Bent Sandridge to whom he is very close. He becomes a successful artist
exhibiting his works in different parts of the world. In the course of time, he finds it difficult to cope with the demands of the art industry. After receiving the news of the sudden illness of grandmother Kopemah, he travels from San Francisco to his ancestral place Oklahoma. He is too late to see her alive but could attend her funeral. In Oklahoma, Set comes to know about his Kiowa origin. As Set has no idea about his parents, his place of origin, his mother tongue, his ancestors and family members, the telegram about his grandmother’s illness turns out to be a catalyst in Set’s search for identity. He meets Grey, a beautiful young medicine woman, who has inherited the vocation of medicine from his grandmother. She hands over to Set a medicine bundle, which his grandmother had wanted to give to him before her death.

Set comes back to the city and engages in his work again. But soon he discovers that the art industry is too overwhelming as he is forced to meet demands. In the bargain he cannot do what his heart would prefer him to do. When he receives the news of the death of his adopted father he breaks down mentally. His opening the medicine bundle worsens his condition. Unable to help him recover, Lola Bourne, his companion takes him to his ancestral land where Set identifies himself with the land and unites with the bear spirit. He realizes his identity as the bear, the medicine man and also as an artist.

The analysis concentrates on how the protagonist’s self-fulfilment and spiritual regeneration are directly linked. Studies in psychology on the influence of spirituality on man are cited to support the analysis. Till a few decades ago spirituality was an unexplored area in psychology. Psychologists like B. F. Skinner and Sigmund Freud were
dismissive in their attitude towards the idea of spirituality. According to B.F. Skinner spirituality has no role in a man’s life and all his hopes and fears have an end in this life on earth. There is nothing beyond the physical and psychological reality of one’s life. Likewise, Freud too rejected faith in the supernatural. He explains that in the absence of a guardian, a child begins to depend on powerful others in his surrounding for safety and security. In his opinion this kind of belief in the unknown power should be shed off as the child grows up.

Thus spirituality was considered by these two great intellectuals as a psychopathological disposition in man. Innumerable researches and surveys were conducted across the globe to find the link between spirituality and man’s psyche. To the wonder of many researchers, spirituality turned out to be a remedy to many psychological issues than a cause for it. Spiritual needs vary according to individuals. 

*The Ancient Child* opens with a folk song that runs as follows.

‘Well, where do you come from?’

And where do you go?

Well, where do you come from? (7)

By placing the folk song at the very beginning of the novel, Momaday acquaints the reader with the disturbance in Set’s mind right away. In the inner recesses of the mind of Set, there is great turbulence caused by the lack of a clear idea of where exactly he belongs and who actually he is. Set had no proper idea about his life prior to adoption by Bent. But flashes of memories and dreams about the past have given him moments
of pleasurable fulfilment. In those ecstatic moments, the most he sees and feels in his mind’s eye are the images of his father and mother and the bear in the stories.

The dead father and mother, and the metamorphosed boy-bear create a sense of wonder in him, as they are from unknown part of the universe. The longing to know more about them turns out to be his spiritual quest. In Set’s native Kiowa culture the stories play a very important role and greatly impact people’s identity.

Who you are, what you think, how you learn, how you relate, what you feel, and what you do, are the ingredients forming the landscape of your life narrative. When the incidents in a subplot of the life narrative become too constraining or threatening, truly bothersome, or seriously diminishing of life’s meaning, the foundation is set for inquiry which can lead to change. (Abels 2)

In his study of therapeutic use of narratives, Abels’ concept of “re-authoring” is the process which helps a person escape from the meaninglessness of one’s situation. The person searches for possible ways to establish this change. In the process of re-authoring, the person is able to derive meaning out of his circumstances.

The stories told by his father are deeply embedded in Set’s memory. These stories help him get out of the stagnancy of his current state. The hold of the stories on Set is gradual and it progresses consistently. Such a process is rejuvenating and leaves permanent imprints.
Traditional folklore adapted by contemporary American writers offers lessons on short-term survival, stresses the importance of the search for identity (and offers folklore itself as a key to individual and community identity), and provides prescriptions for long-term individual and collective health. (Metting 289)

In Metting’s reading of the use of folklore in written literature, he asserts that folklore pass on energy and health to the characters, communities, readers, authors and literature itself. Unlike communal folkstories, Set has a story attached to his name, the story of the tsoai-talee. The story can give him answers to questions like who he is? And “where he is from?”

To attain his unique identity, Set has to establish the connection between character and the tsoai-talee or the bear. Boyer, a historian of the American people, gives an account of the vision quest of Native inhabitants of America.

Native Americans took seriously the visions that came to them in sleep. They also sought access to the supernatural by using physical ordeals to alter their consciousness. Young men gained recognition as adults through– a vision quest –a solitary venture that entailed fasting and waiting for the appearance of a spirit that would endow them with special powers. (14)

The fact is that Set is unaware of the vision quest of his native culture. But his dreams and memories serve as powerful sources of his energy for his imagination and creativity.
There is no evidence in the novel that Set subscribes to any particular religious faith. It is the dreams and memories embedded in the unconscious that kindle his spirit to pursue the sacred “unknown” of the universe. Culliford, a psychologist, lists the different types of such spiritual experiences.

…mystical experiences including personal epiphanies and callings, ritualistic experiences in tribal and cult phenomena often derived from oral traditions, formalized experiences which are highly structured and relating to a specific doctrine, informal everyday insights such as becoming aware that ‘god is with me’ or a spontaneous feeling of love and fellowship with others and/or with nature, spiritual living in which spirituality is a deliberate choice, a constant, a day today lived experience, near death experiences, meaningful dreams and psychedelic (drug-induced) experiences. (25)

Within the types mentioned by Culliford the one to be attributed to Set is the mystical and ritual. The experiences of Set do demonstrate characteristics pertaining to this category.

Set has been leading the life of a successful artist, with his paintings exhibited across countries. He has Jason his manager to take care of the selling of the art pieces. But Set begins to feel the creative flow in him being clogged. Most often he thinks he is being forced to create works in which he has no interest at all. He cannot see his heart in his creations. Though his career is progressing, he is not able to feel any genuine conviction in what he doing.
Innumerable demands were made upon him; he came to understand that success, in terms of fame and fortune, was costly in other terms. More and more often he was asked to compromise his art to himself in one way or another, and more than often not he did so, for he was inclined to be passive and naïve; it was difficult for him to say no. Those who exhibited his work, who praised and purchased it, and who demanded its proliferation began to determine. Set went along. (36)

His spontaneity has been blocked by external pressure and the pointlessness of the end purpose. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge Set too feels the drying up of the creative fountain within himself. In fact, Set puts up a struggle to open up to himself and has been trying to cope with the situation. Nelson, another psychologist, quotes the most influential theory of ‘coping’ by Pargament.

Coping is the ‘continually changing process through which individuals try to understand and deal with significant personal or situational demands in their lives.’ This definition assumes that people are active agents who seek to cognitively construct the significance of events and things of value through appraisal of their meaning, as well as hold on to a sense of value and meaning in life during times of transitions when demands may exceed capabilities. It also assumes that individuals have some kind of coherent orienting system that provides a way of looking at the world and dealing with concrete situations. (157)
Painting has been most essential part of his existence and for that reason alone he has tried his best to cope with the demanding situations. But he is also aware of the fact that in compromising for the sake of already established career and standing he is making himself a coward. Doing art for profit forces his soul to militate. He does not like his work being valued for the money it fetches. He is forced to paint on ideas that sell. He starts longing for genuine admiration—an admiration emanating from the instinctual feeling of a child.

He wanted a child to come to his studio, to look at the splatter of paint on the walls, the floor, the easel, to see the drawings on the walls, to touch his or her hands to the thickly painted linen planes, to say to the child, Just look at this yellow, how it vibrates! Look at the blues, how they make a mystery! Could you have imagined a blue like this? And for a moment the child’s eyes would have been wide with wonder. (37)

He craves for recognition of the organic process behind his creations. The recognition should be alive to the convictions of his artistic soul. It is the creative capacity that made him special and formed his identity, so he feels upset when people ignore this aspect and value his works only for their success in the world.

Goble’s interpretation of Maslow’s concept in this regard is relevant in understanding Set’s predicament.

Maslow found creativity to be a universal characteristic of all the self-actualizing people he studied. Creativeness was almost synonymous
with health, self–actualization, and full humanness. Characteristics associated with this were flexibility, spontaneity, courage, willingness to make mistakes, openness, and humility. As mentioned, in many respects the creativity of these people is similar to that of children before they have learned to fear the ridicule of others, while they are still able to see things freshly and without prejudgment. Maslow believes this to be a characteristic which is too frequently lost as people grow older. Self-actualizing people either do not lose this fresh, naïve approach or, if they lose it, they recover it later in life. ‘Almost any child,’ says Maslow, ‘can compose a song or poem or a dance or a painting or a play or a game on the spur of the moment, without planning or previous intent.’ (Goble 39)

The problem of Set is associated with the loss of his spontaneity brought about by pressures by the external world. In spite of the huge audience following and admiration, Set is not able to derive satisfaction from his works. He becomes more and more restless. Creating a new work and contemplating the process of creation provide him with great satisfaction. Each new work rekindles his spirit. But to his disappointment he is asked to repeat the same work. Flow of his creative thoughts is often blocked when someone demands his desired topics to be painted. Set finds solace in the past “in which he had painted for the sake of painting, out of some wild exuberance of the spirit. He had been full of excitement; the excitement of learning, of experimenting, of feeling his ability and his accomplishment come close together” (38). But things have changed
for the worse. His creative work has to be compromised for the sake of the wishes of people interested in buying his works. He is forty four and the crisis in his career is also a crisis in his soul as painting has been more than a vocation, a calling. He wants to step out of the trap he is caught in but wants to do it gradually. He decides to “fulfill his obligations, to be sure; indeed, he would give the best that [is] in him; but he would first and last be true to himself. He would endeavor to save his soul” (38).

In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, spiritual need is one among the determiners of one’s self actualization. A man has five levels of needs in the ascending order: physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, self esteem needs, and self actualization needs. The hierarchy indicates that each level should be fulfilled to meet the needs of the subsequent level.

Set has reached the threshold of the stage of self actualization. He is always loved and cared for by others but the control they want to exercise on him puts him in bondage. He searches for connectedness and unconditional love. In Psychology, Religion and Spirituality Nelson explains Jung’s theory of individuation and spiritual growth which helps us comprehend Set’s condition.

Jung’s key concept for describing spiritual and personal growth was individuation, a maturational process that involves the reuniting of unconscious materials with the conscious so that the person can achieve wholeness. The holistic Self and God archetypes provide a form for the process and drive it. The groundwork for this is laid in the first half of life, as we move from a kind of vague unified consciousness which
Jung called participation mystique to a clearly defined and functioning ego based in consciousness. This growth of the ego is necessary for development, but its increasing dominance creates a split between the conscious and unconscious aspects of our psyche. This leaves us in a state of disunity, with parts of our personality available in consciousness while opposite aspects necessary for balance remain submerged in the unconscious and inaccessible. At midlife, however, we start to become aware of these opposite, unconscious aspects of the Self such as the shadow and work to reintegrate them. Jung called the use of these opposites by the psyche to facilitate growth and the transcendent function of the personality, a process he saw as similar to the union of opposites or coniunctio oppositorum discussed by medieval alchemists. The acceptance of the shadow and other unconscious material is experienced as a healing process and can be associated with religious experiences. (Nelson 152-153)

What has lain embedded in Set’s unconscious are his childhood, his father, mother and the folk stories. Set’s conscious mind has been preoccupied with thoughts of himself as a painter. Everyone wants public recognition but only on gaining it do they become aware of what it cannot give them—satisfaction of soul. The essential questions now come to the surface from his subconscious causing the conflict described in the quotation above. Conflict is in fact a facilitator of growth and not an obstacle as common perception would have it. This tussle between Set’s conscious and subconscious
is what activates his spiritual journey. As he grows more and more troubled in life, images or incidents from his past start invading his psyche often. He would prefer to give form, colour and expression to these things. But Set fears being underestimated and rejected, as he thinks paintings created out of such emanations may not make sense to the beholder.

Set is compelled by his manager that he should paint according to the need of the audience. Despite the compulsion he is able to paint to his heart’s content on certain occasions. Such moments have given him immense happiness.

There were times when the disillusionment was so great that he wept. It was such a fine thing to paint, to see something—a human face or an orchard or the moon—and to render it, to make a picture of it, according to his vision, which was unique, which was uniquely valid. Oh that excited him. To see and to paint with excitement, that is what brought him to life. (37)

Set thinks of his past and present situations. He was once delighted to see his own works. But once he started painting for the sake of satisfying the public, he lost the joy of deriving pleasure from the very art of painting. Painting to give shape to his creative urge was a revelatory and liberating experience. He had felt perfectly at home working in that manner. When extraneous factors begin to control and direct his creativity, Set feels he is betraying his natural gift and yields to depression and anxiety.
Set’s memories are directly or indirectly connected to his remote past. He reminisces about the constellation of stars which he had read about in his childhood.

URSA MAJOR, the GREAT BEAR. — The first seven stars in this constellation form what is called the Great Dipper. It is situated about 15 degrees north of the zenith, and a little to the east of north… There are four stars which form the dipper, and three in the Tail of the Bear, which form the handle…. (42)

The constellation had aroused a feeling of wonder in Set as it was “his first real notion of the infinite” (42). Like the instant memories, he gets dreams of “his mother’s touch, of her embrace, of all the particulars of her physical presence” (43). Through these memories and dreams Set’s search for his roots, his ancestors and his place of origin commences, though he is not aware of this fact. By reminiscing, dreaming, or imagining he maintains the connection with his dear childhood days.

In Loki[Set] there was a certain empty space, a longing for something beyond memory. He thought often of his mother, dead almost the whole of his life. He knew that she was not the pale, lewd ghost of his dreams; she was the touchstone of his belief in the past. Without knowing her, he knew of her having been; she had given him life, even as he had taken hers; her blood pulsed upon his very heart. Her reality was that of everything on the bygone side of his existence. She was his immediate and most personal antecedent, the matter of which he was made, the
spirit which drove his blood. He could imagine her, Catherine Locke Setman, in a way no one else could. (45-46)

Set’s idea of his origin is primarily based on his mother. If he wants to know more about his existence he should know more about his mother. The empty space in him is formed out of the absence of his mother. She is the “immediate and most personal antecedent” of his existence; it is with her “matter” and “spirit” he is made of.

He also seeks the spirit of his mother in ‘nature.’

*The Ancient Child* demonstrates the intimate connections between place and self identity and the role of journeying in transacting transformations of identity, showing perhaps more carefully than some of the other novels the psychic implications of geographic relocations that all, Native and Non-native face. (Roberson 32)

Next to one’s mother, one’s place plays an important role in shaping one’s personality. Set visiting Oklahoma has significant psychic implications for him. Till that time the place of his origin remained unknown to him. When the telegram about the sudden illness of his grandmother reaches Set, he wonders whether he knew a grandmother existed at all. He wants to meet her for, he has always imagined and looked forward to such a situation in seeking the past of his. He is confident that she could provide a lot of information about his past and also about his mother.

The telegram triggers his quest to know his past and thus is a crucial moment in the narrative.
All that he had of his forebears was sediment in his memory, the memory of words his father had spoken long ago—the stories his father had told him. The longer he looked at the telegram, the more deeply it disturbed him. It was in Set’s nature to wonder, until the wonder became pain, who he was. He had an incomplete idea of himself. (52)

As soon as Set comes to know about the existence of his ancestors and the place where he was born, memories visit him frequently. He travels to Oklahoma to see the sick grandmother. But it is not his grandmother and the house alone he wanted to visit.

… ‘homing’ to tribe is complex: Tribalism is not just an individual’s past, his ‘milieu’ or ‘background.’ Tribe is not just lineage or kinship; home is not just a place... To Indians tribe means family, not just bloodlines but extended family, clan, community, ceremonial exchanges with ‘nature,’ and an animate regard for all creation as sensible and powerful (Lincoln 8).

Set wants to get back to an earlier way of belonging and living that was whole. It is the celebration of the entire creation in which an individual realized fully his connectedness with the cosmos. It is not about finding home in physical space but in one’s own consciousness.
Set has a lot of things that he has to understand and feel to complete his ‘homing.’ Set has to reestablish his lost link with all the things associated with his tribal culture. He thinks of the unique wisdom his father possessed.

Coming down out of the clouds toward Oklahoma City, Set thought of puzzles. He gazed upon the immensity of red and green and yellow geometry—rectangles, triangles, squares, jigsaw shapes. The geometry rolled out forever to the skyline. Oh, but there, he thought, look; there is exception and redemption, a redeeming disorder, the opposing aesthetic of the wilderness—the green belts slashing through the boxes like limbs of lightning, like sawteeth and scythes. It was a country of rivers and creeks, prairies and plains. In school Set was taught that art was resistance… . But Cate Setman knew better. Cate must have spoken the truth to Set, and Set must have known too, even when he was not looking, listening intently, and he would somehow keep the knowledge. Look, he said to himself, the wild crooked courses, reaching in every direction. Water follows the line of least resistance, and it is itself irresistible. It has shaped some of the most impressive forms on the face of earth. (57-58)

‘Nature’ is personified as an artist in the above passage. Set’s enjoyment of the beauty of the landscape also brings memories of his father. Set’s father seems to have known the mysteries of ‘nature.’ The landscape is an art work the author of which is the element water. Set also compares art taught at school and ‘nature’s’ method. Where art is
resistance according to man’s design, water, one of ‘nature’s’ artists, “follows the line of least resistance” while itself being irresistible. It is the water’s way of creating art that he finds missing in himself when he is compelled to produce art for consumption. The memories of his father facilitate this understanding by Set. And a lot of similar incidents occurred to him which reminds him of his father continuously. “He could not remember having seen earth of that colour, it was red: earlier a flat brick red, now deeper, like that particular conte crayon that is red and brown, like old blood, at the same time—or catlinite, the colour of his father’s name (Catlin Setmount)” (63).

When he dozes off for a little while, he dreams about the octopus that he saw years ago. Set wonders why the octopus appears in his dream and he knows that it is his father who knew a lot about the octopus and other sea creatures. Set finds out that he has forgotten the details connected to his name. Finding more about his name becomes another significant part of his journey.

Set comes to the place where his father is buried. The more he wants to know about his past the more the information he gets. Set longs to know more about his niche, his culture, and the traditions. His deep involvement in each moment he spent in Oklahoma is obvious from the emotions he displays. It is the first time Set visits the burial place of his father.

He had a strange feeling there, as if some ancestral intelligence had been awakened in him for the first time. There in the wild growth and the soft glowing of the earth, in the muddy water at his feet, he was
something profoundly original. He could not put his finger on it, but it was there. It was itself genesis, he thought, not genesis in the public domain, not an Old Testament tale, but his genesis. (64)

In a unique moment, feeling the presence of his father’s spirit in the atmosphere Set rejuvenates his own being. Till that day Set has had no idea of where his father is buried. “Set simply accepted that he had been drawn unaccountably into some design of fate in which he belonged.” Thoughts about his father have always been with him in the form of dreams or memories, but his being in the real place where his father belonged excites him extremely. “In [that] close, quaint, ancient smelling room, Cate was close, closer than Set knew” (63). Though it was Set’s wish to know more about his father, this time it seems to him that he is drawn to his goal by fate itself.

Set relishes the traditional food served to him by his father’s kin. He could remember boiled beef, fried potatoes and roasted corns — food he was familiar with in his childhood. The immediate thought that comes to his mind is how much his father liked the beef broth the same way he likes it now. Each and every incident that he goes through reminds him of his past, the past he is seeking for his redemption. He “[begins] almost to feel at home” (66).

Set learns that the late grandma named Kopemah liked Cate dearly. She even kept a buffalo robe over Cate’s burial place as a symbol of his greatness. Because of the death of his grandmother Set misses a significant opportunity to know more about his father. At night he sleeps in the arbour. The moonlit plain mesmerizes him:
He was used to city lights, and for him this moon was the principal thing; every object on earth seemed to stand out in a blue and silver wash, and he could see with great clarity even the shadows of the trees in the middle distance. The arbor was black inside, except the moon beams splintered on the roof of boughs. The wide bench, on which he was to sleep, was stitched with pale blue gunmetal light. The night in its Plains vastness overwhelmed him, and just then a cool, fresh wind lifted from the Washita, and he wanted to give himself up to the deepest sleep. He wanted there to be nothing; he wanted to enter wholly into the deep element of the Plains night in which he imagined nothing was. (71)

Lying on a vast plain, watching the night sky, feeling the soothing wind, he merges with ‘nature’ by slipping into a peaceful sleep. Here again by “entering wholly into the deep element of the Plains night,” he experiences complete inner peace.

Grey, the granddaughter of Kopemah, informs him about the bear medicine bundle that the grandmother has been keeping to hand over to Set. The tomboyish Grey remains a mystery to Set and engages his imagination. He learns from others that Kopemah gave her medicine power to Grey during her last days. In a dream of his, Set sees Grey’s face transformed into that of an ancient woman. To that ancient woman Set “wanted desperately to speak and could not...he was prevented by some monstrous resistance in himself, it seemed” (73). It is obvious that the dream represents Set’s lost chance to talk to his grandmother. And the resistance he feels in the dream is the obstacle he has to overcome in his quest to find his roots.
Other than his father and mother the most persistent image Set receives in his mind is that of the bear. Set’s memories of “bee-wolves” are a facilitating factor in the summoning of the bear image. Set was stung by a bee while he was exploring the field during his stay at the orphanage. Set was not supposed to be in the field and to prevent him from going there anymore Sister Francesca, one of the sisters in the orphanage, had told him that the “bee-wolves” were “old name for bears” (74). But to her astonishment, Set had declared one day that he was no longer “afraid of bee-wolves” (66). His memories of the constellation Ursa Major or the Great Bear and the bee-wolves do play a role in connecting him to the image of bear.

Set remembers having painted a few pictures the motives and inspiration for which remained mysterious even to himself. One such was the ‘Night Window Man.’ “It was a bright green frame, a window, in which was roiling blue and gray background, a thick, ominous depth; and from this there emerged a figure, a grotesque man with red hair and red dress, approaching” (106). Lola Bourne thinks that the figure in the painting suggested “profound energy and excitement…and [that] he is about to be transformed” (107). Set could connect his being at a spiritual and emotional level with those figures. He prefers to call them “self portraits.”

As time progresses Set starts to recollect stories told by his father. He had narrated a story of a boy who appeared at the Kiowa camp. Everyone was stunned to see the strange visitor. He spoke a language that no one could understand but everyone developed a liking for him. People were happy to receive that amazing boy. But to their disappointment the boy disappeared the next morning. A wise old man took
stock of the situation and interpreted that it might be a dog or a bear from the woods. Everyone believed the wise man’s words.

His father had elaborated the story adding dramatic situations so that Set could get its full import. At the time of listening to the story Set was about the age of the boy in it. The description of the strange boy’s slow movement while coming out from the dark woods amused the little Set.

Throughout Native American and Old European traditional oral literature, the bear has borne such metaphorical possibilities for human-animal relations and transformations through the storytelling process. (Rekow 149)

Set carries the incidents of the story in his subconscious mind. In the story of Tsoai, a boy is turned into a bear, and in the story of a boy appearing at the camp the boy is assumed to be a bear. When his father narrated the story, it was natural for Set to connect himself with the bear. He also remembers an occasion in his childhood when he was told about his name’s connection with the bear, though he is not able to recollect how exactly it is related. His recognition of the connection with the bear becomes strong as he receives the bear medicine bundle from Grey.

He took hold of it, but she did not give it up at once. For a moment in which he thought they must have been engaged in ritual, they held the bundle between them. It smelled of smoke, and of some essence he could not identify. Ordinarily, he would have been extremely
uncomfortable at such a moment, but in fact he was altogether at ease and at the same time strangely stimulated. He felt a kind of euphoria, as if he had taken a strong drink. But then, though he could not see it, he felt a trembling in his hands. He wanted to remove his hands from the bundle, but he could not. His whole being shivered under his skin, imperceptibly. There was a burning at his eyes, and he had a vision of the grandmother, little and shriveled in her coffin, strangely like a child. And he imagined the mummy of a child in the bundle and felt he had laid his hands to death, that he had come into the presence of the darkest power—until this moment he would have named it ‘evil’—he had ever known. And he was exhilarated beyond belief. (115)

In the section devoted to introduction of characters which precedes the beginning of the novel, Momaday introduces the bear as the “mythic embodiment of wilderness.” The ‘bear’ is the “mythic embodiment of wilderness,” the “darkest power” or the “evil” that complements the other half—the ‘good power’ or ‘good’ of ‘nature.’

To interpret it in terms of Jungian psychology, Set has to balance the ‘good power’ of his conscious and the ‘dark power’ hidden in his unconscious. This complementary existence of polarities finds expression in almost all the cultures of the world, like the ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ of Chinese philosophy. Mankind has devoted most of its efforts to find solution by excluding one of the two polarities. Denying the other has never led to resolution as each of us carry both the aspects. Momaday’s depiction of the Native American consciousness no doubt demonstrates a path towards synthesis.
Set goes back to San Francisco and tries to get attuned to his work. But he realizes that he is thinking too much about himself and that his mind is no more normal. Set imagines a conversation in which he gives expression to his problems to Bent, his adopted father.

The thing, is Bent, I am beginning to doubt my mind. I don’t mean to suggest insanity, but there are times when I think I am becoming unhinged, neurotic, obsessive. Yes, obsession, if I understand rightly the meaning of that word. But what I am obsessed with, I don’t know. And that’s the aggravating thing. I seem to have become more dependent upon my work, but I have a terrible time now keeping my mind on it. I can imagine myself coming to a point where I must work—I love my work, I am compelled to work—and I can’t. That frightens me. Last night trying to sort things out, I thought: I have come to a dangerous place in my life. Something threatens me—middle age, sickness, what? Sometimes I think a disease has been eating at my insides for years, all my life. I find myself struggling with something, and the struggle becomes more and more violent, and I begin to be desperate. I don’t like being desperate; I am afraid of desperation… . Maybe, Bent, I have come to grips with my demon. Didn’t you tell me once that it is the most ancient exorcism of all? And yes, you told me something else. You told that the seventh naval rule is, Never take yourself too damned seriously (138-139).
The passage quoted is significant as it depicts a turning point moment in Set’s life. When confronted with the problem first Set had not known that he had to find the answer by attempting to get in touch with his ancestral roots. The people, culture, folklore and landscape did in fact connect him to the native wisdom through which he learns to “come to grips with [his] demon.” This is a life lesson every human being must learn. Each of us should acknowledge the demon in us and reach the moment of exorcism to be genuinely, authentically human.

Set speaks about the strange dreams that he has every night. These dreams give him both “dread and relief” (136). Set is sure that the cause of the dreams is not journey to Oklahoma. “What happened was something that began a long time before that” (136) though it was after the journey that dreams, memories and visions flooded his psyche. In his imagined conversation with Bent he says:

…my thoughts (suspicions, instincts, whatever they were) seemed all to point to a time and place in the past, may be the remote past. It was as if I were trying to bring some crucial memory, deeply buried, to the surface of my mind (140).

Set becomes acutely aware of this psychological process that has taken hold of his mind. In Freudian terms Set’s condition may be interpreted as repressed emotions appearing as dreams, day dreams or even powerful sources of creative production. So far in Set’s life these repressed “thoughts” which he himself explains as “suspicions, instincts, or
whatever they may” have been food for his paintings. From a Jungian point of view Set has been trying to achieve a balance between the conscious and unconscious, and is on the verge of reaching that point.

The restlessness of Set is caused by his knowledge about his folk belief. The demon, that he believes he is possessed of, is part of the belief that each person has a totem. They also believe that each person’s name has a strong link to its meaning. The name Set denotes bear in his culture. But Set is yet to understand his bear identity. In fact, Set has to identify the bear power in him to emerge successful from the struggle. In the peak of prosperity, he is afraid of ‘illnesses’ and ‘middle age,’ just like a normal person. He knows that this unnecessary fear is not part of his real nature. He wants to get rid of these bad feelings and get back to being his normal self soon.

Another thing that frightens and upsets him is the compulsion in his job. For him, painting is an irresistible expression of one’s organic thought but when the painter is compelled to paint in conformity with another’s idea, the result is a deformed, meaningless picture. And the painter is reduced to a soulless wreck. But these pictures serve a purpose for, they carry the struggle Set is going through and Set recognizes this.

There were many of the dark figures in my work now. I didn’t know how to account for them. They were a kind of fascination to me. They seemed endlessly vital and mysterious. And they were self portraits in a sense, for they expressed a certain reality in me. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew that it was, and I knew that it mattered greatly to me in some way. And it was coming closer and closer to the surface of my
thoughts; I was going to recognize and understand it sooner or later, and that act of understanding or recognition was going to be of the deepest importance to me. (144)

‘Venture Beyond Time’ is another painting that depicts the change Set has been going through. It also contains a dark figure and his transformation. In Set’s perception the painting portrays a “horseman passing from time into timelessness” (159). When Set exhibits it in New York, an art collector comments upon it:

It describes what must be the sensation of the Red Indian riding his horse very fast, so fast and free that the earth becomes a blur and the horse’s head dissolves away. And surely this means that the Red Indian becomes one with the horse, has become himself the head of the horse. (161)

Her opinion on the painting based on the Kafkaesque concept of metamorphosis reflects very well Set’s state of mind. Set himself needs a transformation which gets expressed on the canvas. The dark figures in his paintings have most of the time similarities with the image of a bear.

The death of Bent comes as a blow to Set’s mental balance. A larger part of his life Set had spent with Bent. Bent was witness to much of the identity formation of Set. So Set cannot link himself with anyone else in the world the way he can with Bent. He goes through severe depression. He realizes that his mind and soul are in danger. “Set thought he must be going mad; there were moments when he was absolutely
convinced of it; there were such strange and disturbing visions in his head, such impulses to violence, such pain” (215). Gradually Set realizes the increasing intensity of the mysterious power in him. He loses control over himself. He begins to feel ‘helpless.’

What he saw, not once but recurrently, was a dark, impending shape on a dark field of the sky. It seemed very slowly to revolve and approach. At a certain distance it was seen to be a beast, massive and indefinite. (215)

In Set’s mind the image of the bear is projected as a massive form in the sky. Another significant characteristic he attributes to the shape is its “indefinite” nature. Set feels that the shape is identical to the dark figures of his paintings.

The pain of his art becoming banal induces darkness in his work but ironically it is this darkness that activates his spiritual thirst and the subsequent journey towards his inner core. In the course of time, Set begins to turn violent. Without sleep and food he becomes fragile. But he demonstrates great creativity:

Even on the verge of madness there were times of profound lucidity.

The dissolution of his life seemed an illusion, and he was filled with purpose and confidence. He knew what others, in their ordinary perceptions, did not know. He painted with great energy and clarity and assurance. Never had his paintings been so true to his vision and his capacities. The coordination of his hand and eye was as precise as it was possible to be, he felt. His sense of proportion was extraordinary. He
understood color, and his placement of colors, and his blending of colors, were nearly perfect. He understood the factors of composition; he knew exactly how to achieve the balance between appearance and reality. And his subjects were worthy, primary, serious. His paintings reflected, as art must strive to do, a great and true story of the world, he believed. But this clarity, this lucidity, this principal work, was his alone, and he did not want to trade in it. He wanted to keep it to himself, as it were, for it was as personal to him as thought. Yes, he believed, there is only one story, after all, and it is about the pursuit of man by God, and it is about a man who ventures out to the edge of the world, and it is about his holy quest, and it is about his faithful or unfaithful wife, and it is about the hunting of a great beast. In his paintings others might have seen confusion and chaos, but Set saw the pure elements of the story, and he must be true to the story at all costs. To fail in this would be to lose himself forever. He must be true to the story. (116)

Set has got the confidence that it is possible for him to know and feel the primordial characteristics of the universe. His ability to link his predicament with his paintings is evidence that he is well on his way to reinventing himself.

An unconscious Set is found on the floor of his studio, with the bear medicine bundle lying beside opened.

The little red blanket was removed, and exposed was the medicine itself, a bag made from the whole skin of a bear cub, including the
head and the feet. Some of its contents were scattered on the floor: a shriveled grizzly paw with great yellow claws, pouches of tobacco and herbs, small fluorite and quartz crystals, a pipestone carved in the shape of a fish, a hard black twist that Grey would later identify as the penis of a wolf, bits of ancient bone, a yellow scalp. The bag was well preserved, though it was obviously very old. The hair was thick and matted. The claws were small and sharp and well formed. Brass buttons were fixed in the eyes and along the vertical incision on the chest and stomach. There was about it, upon and within it, the odors of bear grease, of mold, of death, of deep, humid earth run through with bitter roots. (242)

The act of opening the bear medicine bundle is born out an instinctual desire to know himself by knowing about the bundle. He had already felt the power of the medicine bundle at the time of receiving it from Grey. Being the keeper of the bundle added spirit to his already existing notion of himself as a carrier of mysterious power.

At birth, we are relatively helpless, incomplete and dependent on others for our survival. Our archetypal life is centered around the ‘Earth Mother.’ We are largely merged with Her. As we develop, we acquire the ability to separate from Her and move out into the world, but meet with ‘dragons’ both within and without. In a sequence of challenges, rites, and rituals, we strive to find our unique and autonomous selves while remaining connected to both our earthly and numinous sources. (Schermer 202)
In his progression to youth and middle age, Set has become more and more individual centric. Such a mindset is inadequate to fight the “dragons within and without.” But at a certain point of time, he realizes that he has to strike a balance between his individual soul and the universal soul. The medicine bundle in fact acts as a bridge to reach back to the harmony he had had with ‘nature’ in his childhood. The opening of the medicine bundle re-established contact between his individual consciousness and the power of the cultural consciousness of his tribe, the latter nurtured by thousands of years of worship of and communion with ‘nature.’ Earlier, Set had made sense of the dark power that became a resident in his consciousness. But soon he understands that it is a dragon within and that he himself is the carrier of the object which is the embodiment of that power.

As the doctors declare the “mental breakdown” of Set, Lola decides to take him to Grey in Oklahoma. Grey uses her medicine power to cure Set. As a part of the process of healing, Grey takes Set to her mother’s place at Lukachukai. “He was taking kind of strength from the journey. There was exhilaration just in the going; motion was a principal expression of his life, had he known it, and in it there were properties of healing” (274). Wapner argues that relocation of the alienated individual to his native place has the power to revitalize him. He stresses that environment has a major role in upsetting and rejuvenating the psyche of an individual (223). Throughout the journey to Lukachukai, he continues to wonder at the beauty of the land.

The March light was of a brittle quality that startled Set. From the Penneplain of the Sangre de Cristos he had the certain sense that he could see farther over land than he had ever seen before. And in the
foreground of this vast reach of the earth was the gorge. It was etched into the plain so incisively and yet so delicately that it seemed the deepest shadow in the land. It was on the earth and in the earth at once, starkly visible on and in, at once, a thing in nature that seemed almost unnatural, a profound mystery, and an old condition of the planet, anonymously vague and definite, like lightning, and the shadow of lightning. (274)

In the expressions “unnatural” and “profound mystery,” Set is articulating the divine power he feels in the atmosphere. Set has been familiar with only the highly modernized cities and its culture. The wilderness has evoked a sense of divinity in him. He might have developed a strong connection with the grasslands and mountains of his native place in his childhood. And now the wilderness is the sole source that reconnects him with his origin and the spirits of his father and mother. Altogether Set is able to embrace the numinosity that is spread in ‘nature.’

In Rubin’s words such experiences of divinity are

…usually intense and compelling. It involves heightened awareness, intensity, and aliveness. You see glory in the flower, grace in the slithering animal in the grass, wonder in the starry skies. Time may elongate. You feel the luminous embedded in the ordinary. You feel centered and balanced, intimate with the universe. You feel the self and the universe are sacred. You are catapulted out of (or into) your self. The sense of yourself expands—at least momentarily beyond a
cohesive, integrated self to a communion and homecoming with the universe. The universe feels more alive and wondrous and less (or non) conflictual. Life has a deeper meaning. (80)

This description of features of moments of transcendence captures the essence of Set’s experience during the journey. This experience will have a lasting effect on Set. Synthesis and fusion have been considered the ultimate goal of life and the purpose of human existence. The sense of “profound mystery” of the gorge helps achieve a mystical union with the landscape of his ancestors. It can also be said that he attains a state of oneness where the other or any external agent of evil has no space. The union also heals Set. In Lukachukai, Set lives with Grey. Set decides that “he must play out his part as Set-talee, Tsoai-talee, the boy bear, rock-tree boy.

In the night he went out to see, as for the first time, the innumerable brilliant points of light in the sky. Looking at them he thought he had never seen the night, and he wept and laughed and at last kept the silence of the stars. In the early morning he walked into the dawn’s light, slowly at first, stiff with cold, but warming as the flood of light fell from the east, and he saw with wonder and fear and thanksgiving the land become radiant, defined by light and long, colour bearing distances.

And when enough of his strength returned he began to run (291)

It was the gorge then and now it is light. Set spends a lot of time continuing to feel the divinity of the land. The sunlit land evoked feelings of “wonder, fear and thanksgiving” in him. He gains the idea that he is part of a larger reality that he can see and feel in
front of him. Such an understanding makes him feel free. This feeling of liberation gives him unlimited energy and satisfaction.

The freedom he experiences is manifested in the form of his running. He runs without any reason and runs without a destination. He begins to feel the rhythm of ‘nature.’

He ran until the sweat streamed on his body, and he tasted the salt exertion at the corners of his mouth, and he ran on until his breathing came in time with his stride and his whole body was fitted into the most delicate precise rhythm. He entered into the current of the wind, of water running, of shadows extending, of sounds rising up and falling away. His life was in motion; in motion was his life. He ran until running became the best expression of his spirit, until it seemed he could not stop, that if he stopped he would lose his place in the design of creation – and beyond that, until his lungs burned and breath came hard and fast and loud, and his legs and feet were almost too heavy to lift – and beyond that, deeper into the rhythm, into state of motion, mindless and inexorable, without end (296).

He enjoys the liberation physically. He runs almost every day. By running he ensures that he spends everyday in harmonious rhythm with ‘nature.’

But Set needs to liberate his soul. So, he visits Tsoai, the rock tree,
Set stood in awe of Tsoai. He could not take his eyes from it. He was stricken, spellbound. An awful quiet was in his heart; the thing before him was unimaginable, in some sense beyond knowledge and belief, and he knew that it was sacred. As he looked, the stars of the Big Dipper gradually appeared over it. They became brighter and brighter, riding over the north edge of the rock tree, revolving down the sky. And when he brought his focus back upon the monolith, a strange pitch-black shadow lay upon it, near the base. It was the image of a great bear, rearing against Tsoai. It was the vision he had sought (312).

Finally his soul is liberated as he recognizes himself in Tsoai-talee. The appearance of the bear boy or Tsoai-talee at the base of the monolith Tsoai thus becomes a reality to him. Set achieves a concord between his conscious and subconscious minds. When he witnesses the “image of the bear” as “pitch black shadow” he is imagining himself as Tsoai-talee, standing on the base of Tsoai. He is able to see himself as part of universe. Thus, Set is finally able to experience the vision he has sought throughout his life. Set’s understanding and his experience are best illustrated in the following passage which gives a clear description of spiritual experiences.

As barriers between self and nonself erode in the ‘nonself-centered subjectivity’ one embodies in moments of spirituality, one feels aligned with the universe—a self-expansive and self-enriching connectedness with the world characterized by a sense of engagement, not escape or detachment. In this being-at-oneness, one views the world
from a more inclusive perspective in which self and other are seen as mutually interpenetrating facets of the universe rather than as polar oppositions. Seeing the world and one’s self from this perspective casts a different, more benign light on such perennial human struggles as anxiety, guilt, fear, and the possibility for happiness and inner peace. (Rubin 69)

Set has been struggling for years to reach this state of “being-at-oneness.” At the height of fame and glory, he deeply worried about the compartmentalization into which people had driven him. Compelled to estrange himself from his innate ability, Set suffered a psychic split. He would have preferred his creativity to flow like water which “follows the line of least resistance, and it is itself irresistible.” It is such a state of creativity that can result in lasting works of art like the “the most impressive forms” shaped by water on earth.

After having been restored to his original being by the reestablishment of his connections with his ancient native culture, Set is now able to paint spontaneously and the works carry uniqueness. He has reached the state of complete satisfaction. Momaday too is fascinated by the story of the boy turning into a bear. Of Set, Momaday comments:

It (Devil’s Tower) is the sacred place in Kiowa tradition and it is the place where the boy turned into a bear. I identify with that boy. I have for many years. And I have struggled with my bear power through those years…. Set, my work in progress, is about the boy who turns a bear, and in a sense I’m writing about myself. I’m writing an
autobiography, but I’m imagining a story that proceeds out of my own experience of the bear power. (Woodard 13)

The most interesting thing associated with the Tsoai-talee is that Momaday himself acknowledges the fact that he has been struggling with the bear power for a long period. Gulliford explains that the Native Americans believe in what they call “vision quest sites.” A “vision” or “dream” one has had at such a place can help that person acquire the “animal or bird spirit, which then becomes the source of his personal power” (81). The concept of animal and bird becoming the source of power has always exercised a hold on human imagination. The folklore of various cultures do carry such instances. Recently the pet animals of the Harry Potter novels and the daemons in the fantasy novels of Philip Pullman, especially The Golden Compass, have appealed to popular imagination. So much so that there are modules to help people get in touch with their daemons. This phenomenon has been variously interpreted as physical manifestation of the soul, conscience, guardian angel, a method of examining ourselves and so on. The Jungian concept of animus (the hidden masculine side of every woman) and anima (the hidden feminine side of every man) are applied to understand it. There are also certain quarters where it is believed that it is possible to learn to see and speak to that part of psyche or subconscious voice, normally hidden from our consciousness. It is pertinent to note that Set evolves through experiences akin to those associated with the phenomenon.
While a literal interpretation of such phenomena can only lead to delusionary cul de sacs, they nevertheless have significant implications for making sense of the spiritual dimension of human personality.

The word “spirituality” was used by patients in five different ways. It expressed a deeply felt sense of unity and connection with the universe. One surrenders self-interest and control and opens to the world, the gap between self and universe lessens and one experiences the divineness of life and a serenity of being. The second use of the word spirituality depicted deeper, more sustaining values guiding one’s life higher meaning and purpose than self-aggrandizement — and a more balanced, flexible, and tolerant attitude toward life. The cultivation of particular qualities and virtues that are ordinarily neglected in daily life in western secular culture such as awe, wonder, humility, forgiveness, joyousness, love, wisdom, and compassion were closely linked to the third use of the word spirituality. The word was also used by patients to refer to a better, more humble, alive, contented, and loving self; or an unconditioned and uncorrupted, pure, and authentic core of one’s being and a natural and organic way of living, devoid of artifice and dissembling. And finally: spiritual paths referred to the practices designed to foster any of the first four experiences. (Rubin 67)

Set surrenders a promising career to experience the “divineness of life and serenity of being.” Secondly, Set searches for a life of higher meaning, that which satisfies his
soul. Thirdly, Set shows “awe, wonder, humility, forgiveness, joyousness, love, wisdom and compassion, when he sheds off the suffocating individual centric existence. Fourthly, Set’s artistic mind seeks an “unconditioned and uncorrupted, pure and authentic core of one’s being.” And Set has adopted practices to attain the stages listed above and fulfils the condition listed as the fifth by Rubin.

Set’s life till his spiritual regeneration can be divided into four phases: the disturbances he felt at the prosperous period of his career, his dependence on the remote past for solace, undergoing ritualistic spiritual practice in his native land and his final attainment of revitalized self. There is concurrence between his spiritual regeneration and his evolution as a full fledged artist. The novel itself is divided into four parts—Planes, Lines, Shapes and Shadows — all constituents and phases in the art of painting. The hallmark feature of the novel is its strong hint at the deep correspondences between making art and making one’s life.