

Aboriginal Woman Autobiography and the Problematics of Identity in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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In her autobiographical novel *My Place* (1987) Sally Morgan makes an attempt to trace her family history by matrilineal descent. Sally comes to know about her Aboriginal past when one day her grandmother Nan in a mood of despair reveals the fact that she is a 'black' woman (*My Place* 120). When this new knowledge of her Aboriginal past is revealed, Sally becomes conscious of her matrilineal descent:

For the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan's colouring. She was right, she wasn't white. Well, I thought logically, if she wasn't white, then neither were we. What did that make us, what did that make me? I had never thought of myself as being black before. (*My Place* 120)

Sally explores her family's past and decides to write a 'family history' book incorporating the life experiences of her grandmother, mother and, her uncle (*My Place* 190). Sally's autobiographical novel therefore includes the life-histories of three other characters who are related to Sally's life. This mode of writing an autobiography is unique because the author (Sally Morgan is the author of this novel and also a character in the novel) is not interested to narrate only her life-history, rather she takes into account the life-histories of other family members. The author separately records the stories of her Aboriginal uncle Arthur, her Aboriginal mother Gladys and, her Aboriginal grandmother Nan. In fact, Sally's autobiography lacks an essential broad story - there are mininarratives (different life-histories) which are linked with one another. All these small narratives seem to challenge the Western mode of writing a grand metanarrative autobiography which only concentrates on one defining and essential self. As an important black Aboriginal autobiography, Sally Morgan's *My Place* seems to be a postmodern autobiography which engages to show not only the life of the author, but also the lives of the other black relatives of the author. Sally's life narrative has a relevance in the novel when it is compared to the life narratives of Arthur, Gladys and Nan. If seen from the perspective of Western autobiography, *My Place* can be treated as a different kind of autobiographical writing which apparently challenges the basic convention of writing life-histories. Writing from a marginal position, Sally's autobiography attempts to de-essentialize the Aboriginal black identity that the Western theorists have homogenized in their writings. As a document of Aboriginal life-histories, *My Place* glorifies the plurality of the Aboriginal race in Australia. The Western critics have always tried to homogenize the black experience in their theories and speaking on this issue the renowned black American critic Bell Hooks in her essay "Postmodern Blackness" (1990), suggests the black writers to criticize the unique black identity that the Western theorists have propagated in their theories to erase differences of black experience. Hook says, "The critique of essentialism encouraged by postmodernist thought is useful . . . We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency." (*The Norton Anthology of*

Theory and Criticism 2482). In *My Place* Morgan critiques the universal notion of black identity by writing about many black aboriginal selves that tell about different black experiences. Bell Hooks comments on this important issue by stating, “When black folks critique essentialism, we are empowered to recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible.” (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* 2483).

Among the four different narratives in *My Place*, Arthur’s story presents his journey from working as a servant to the whites in missionary homes to becoming a rich farmer and finally the white government taking away his land and property. His story shows his failure to fight against white government’s supremacy and how he encounters the racist stereotypes of his society. But, Arthur is never too much emotional in telling about his past. He understands the futility of protesting against the white rule and also knows that the blacks will remain forever inferior to the whites. At the end of his story, Arthur therefore says to Sally, “You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines. Aah, it’s always been the same. They say there’s been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that’s lie. I tell you, the black man has nothing, the government’s been robbing him blind for years.” (*My Place* 266). In Glady’s and Daisy’s stories, one can locate the pain and agony of a doubly colonized native. When they narrate their stories to Sally, they feel ashamed of their past and are also reluctant to tell all the details about their past. In fact, Glady and Daisy belong to that generation of Australia’s colonial history when the assimilation policy was in effect. They both had to cope with the brutal assimilation policy of the whites which did not allow an Aboriginal child to keep his / her unique black identity and were forced to assimilate the white culture. The trauma of colonization inherent in the assimilation policy of the whites had been so deep that Glady and Daisy concealed their Aboriginal identity and suppressed their memories of original past. Anne Brewster in her book *Aboriginality and Sally Morgan’s My Place* pinpoints this issue of suppressing the Aboriginal identity, “During the 1940s and 1950s both Daisy and Glady felt ashamed and fearful of identifying as Aboriginal. They denied their Aboriginality and attempted to repress their memories of the past.” (17). However, unlike Glady and Daisy who had been the victims of assimilation policy of the whites, Sally is proud to own an Aboriginal identity. In her story one finds her insistent desire to know her past and reclaim it. Brewster finds this difference interesting in the novel:

My Place is the story of the excavation of the family’s history by a younger woman for whom Aboriginality was a badge of pride rather than of shame. It tells of Morgan’s excitement over her new-found heritage and also her frustration in trying to unlock the secrets of the family’s painful and humiliating past. . . . The book is a story of the dislocation of generations; where her grandmother and mother had hidden their past, and their Aboriginality, Morgan wanted to reclaim and make visible the past, an action fiercely resisted by her grandmother. (Brewster 17)

It therefore becomes clear that Sally’s search for her identity is intimately linked to her mother’s, grandmother’s and great uncle’s stories of the past. In fact, as we all know that the Aboriginal women autobiographers have always tried to define their identity in relation to the family that they belong. The family’s identity for the Aboriginal women writers is more important than the individual identity. Brewster interprets this important concern for the family among the Aboriginal women writers as a contradictory attitude of the Aboriginal women writers to the “First World feminism which sees the family as oppressive for women.” (Brewster 10). Apart from the fact that Sally attempts to reclaim her Aboriginal identity with the help the stories

of Arthur, Gladys and Daisy; one finds that she is more interested in the story of her mother Gladys. Gladys's story as it seems has been prioritized by Sally. The prioritization of Gladys's story becomes emphatic when one finds that seventy seven pages in the novel have been used to record Gladys's history. Arthur's history is limited to forty five pages, whereas Daisy's history is limited to forty pages in the novel. It is this important fact that strikes me as a reader of this autobiographical novel. In fact, Gladys's story shares a significant critical relationship to the story of Sally.

Sally emphasizes the story of Gladys because Gladys has a very strong influence in the life of Sally. When we read the narrative of Sally, we find that Sally's childhood is mother-centric. Gladys influences Sally to continue his studies and complete her education. Sally's affinity with her mother is strong and they both share some common qualities. Sally's imaginative mind is reflected in her paintings whereas Gladys's imagination is reflected at the Parkerville's Children's Home when she counts "the numerous rainbow-coloured dragonflies that skimmed across the surface of the water." (*My Place* 314). In fact, when Sally persuades both Gladys and Daisy to tell about the past, then Gladys is the first to take initiative and help Sally to know about her Aboriginal past. It is clear from the narrative of Gladys that Sally is intimate to her and this intimacy is exclusive. Sally's intimacy with her grandmother Daisy and great uncle Arthur is not deep and exclusive like her mother Gladys. In Sally's life-history Daisy and Arthur are marginalized by the presence of Gladys. This obviously accounts for the less number of pages used to record the story of Arthur and Daisy. However, Gladys's story of the past seems to be important from the point of view of Sally's Aboriginal identity. But before explaining this issue, it is necessary to explicate Gladys's story from a different dimension. In Gladys's narrative, one finds the character of Bill who happens to be the white husband of Gladys. While narrating her past, Gladys clearly mentions that when she married Bill, everybody in Bill's family and Gladys's family disapproved the marriage. The outcome of the marriage of Bill and Gladys is not a happy one. Bill becomes alcoholic after marriage and also develops a kind of indifference to the relatives of Gladys. But instead of accusing Bill for his racist attitudes, Gladys builds up a sympathetic figure of Bill in her story. When Bill on one occasion refuses to meet Arthur, then Gladys explains the attitude of Bill by stating in her story, "Bill was a strange man, he wasn't prejudiced against other racial groups, just Aboriginals. . . . Bill had spent a lot of his childhood in country towns. I think that moulded his attitudes to Aboriginal people." (*My Place* 373). In her story Gladys suppresses her guilty consciousness of marrying a white man who has ruined her dreams of happy marriage. Gladys therefore presents Bill differently in her story to evoke a sympathetic response from Sally. Gladys's attempt to present Bill in a sympathetic way to Sally becomes more relevant when we take into account Sally's hate for her father Bill. Sally hates Bill because he is an alcoholic. Gladys therefore strategically gives importance to Bill in her story and thereby makes an attempt to link Sally with his white father. This attempt of Gladys is problematic in terms of Sally's Aboriginal identity. In fact, by associating Sally with his father Bill, Gladys's story critiques the notion of Aboriginality that Sally claims to seek in her book. Gladys's story, as if seeks to remind Sally that the concept of Aboriginal identity which she is trying to reclaim will invite problems when seen from the domain of half-castes¹. Sally is a half-caste daughter of Bill and Gladys and her understanding of the Aboriginal consciousness can be contested by those who are the pure black natives of Australia. Gladys's story therefore complicates the search of Sally's Aboriginal identity and questions the very authenticity of it.

Works Cited

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