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## Retrieving Aboriginal Past through Memory and Historical Documentation: Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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Sally Morgan's *My Place* underlines how autobiographical post-colonial writing plays a significant role in establishing the subject's sense of location, belonging and an affirmation to extract one's native roots from the web of colonized accounts. As in the case of Morgan, it is the author who gives the place meaning, and draws meaning from her presence. In retrieving the past through personal encounters, Morgan seeks to construct a communal identity, while no less important is the location of identity biologically, culturally and geographically through the common strand of aboriginality. *My Place* is about Morgan's quest for knowledge of her family's past and the fact that she has grown up under false pretences. It is the story of three aboriginal women- Sally, Glad and Nan- who found their futures and their pasts with their personal struggle and returning to their aboriginal heritages.

In the last quarter of twentieth century contemporary Australian Aboriginal visual and performing artists, film makers, musicians gained worldwide representation and acclaim. They showcased that traditional aboriginal oral and visual expressions were much more elaborate than everyday material culture. Native histories have been invariably represented by colonial historiographies. If this has been the mode of representation, the question of representation, the question of how such histories should be written while correcting their distorted versions, gave rise to write private and communal histories independent of European versions. During the 1960's aboriginals in Australia demanded the right to self- determination and land rights. This movement was accompanied by a large scale production of Aboriginal histories, memoirs, literary texts and other genres on the pre- settler history of the country. It was an attempt to draft their own histories in their own languages and narrative modes. A significant genre in post-colonial aboriginal writing is life writing. Part individual life story, part collective biography, the life narrative is an ethnographic account of a different life. Such accounts, especially by native American, Australian and Canadian women, began appearing in large numbers from the 1970s, and Sally Morgan was among them who became a voice for indigenous people in the world.

Sally Morgan was born in Perth, the capital of Western Australia, the eldest of five children. As a child, Morgan became aware that she differed from other children at her school because of her non-whiter physical appearance, and was frequently questioned by other students about her family background. She understood from her mother that her ancestors were from India. However when Morgan was 15, she learnt that she and her sister were in fact of Aboriginal descent, from the Palku people of the Pilbara. Aboriginal people have never received their justice in Australian history. In *My Place* Sally and her mother both believe that history of Australia is "about the white man"(161).this history was greatly influenced by the commonwealth of Australia Constitution which denied citizenship to Australian native tribes and

it took nearly seventy years to amend the sections and delete the phrases which exclude indigenous people (Disher 126). McGrath and Markus call this period of time “the Great Australian Silence” (118) during which most historians largely ignored Aboriginal people. Later in 1905, an act was implemented to make provision for the better protection and care of Aboriginal inhabitants of Western Australia which is often cited as the Aborigines Act 1905. Rather than protecting Aboriginal people, the Act deprived them of freedom and caused them great suffering (Aoyama 112) as in the story, Daisy was rarely allowed to go and see her daughter in the home. The Act also legally separated Aboriginal children from their parents and placed them in institutions such as missions and children’s homes. Arthur was placed in the Swan Native and Half- Caste Mission, and Gladys was sent to the Parkerville Children homes. Furthermore, the Act limited indigenous job opportunities. Daisy had no choice but to become a maid. It is generally agreed that, as Harumi Aoyama points out, the protection Acts of the various states aimed at accomplishing three things: appropriating land from Aboriginal people; using them as a work force for white people; and converting them to Christianity (Aoyama 112).

By the late 1960s the policy of assimilation was repealed together with most Aboriginal protection and Welfare laws. During the 1960s social attitudes towards indigenous people gradually changed. Native tribes were granted “voting rights in federal elections, equal pay, and were counted in the census” (Disher 198). They were also allowed to choose their life styles and to preserve Aboriginal identity and culture (Aoyama 119). In this way, members of native tribes were finally recognized as full-fledged Australian citizens. However, they still face various problems as a result of the treatment they received over many years. One of the lingering scars of years of official discriminatory policy is exemplified by what is called “the Stolen Generations” which refers to Aboriginal children who were forcibly separated from their parents by law from the 1920s to the 1960s (Doyle 612). These children lacked a sense of their own background or an understanding of their indigenous identity and cultural history. They also felt alienated in white society. As a result, they had nowhere what they considered their “place”. In *My Place*, Sally Morgan dramatizes the many problems faced by “the Stolen Generations. Morgan's *My Place* is one of the best known indigenous texts in Australia. In less than ten years after its first publication, *My Place* logically found its place in the list of canonical literary texts studies in the Departments of literature and Cultural Studies in Australia and abroad. The timing of its publication was 1988, when Australia was to begin a national process of reconciliation with its native populations. The collective opinion from all around was that it was necessary text for all Australians to read. Among the other opinions, a significant one was that the text voiced a sort of Australian history which hadn't been written before and which was desperately required. At the same time, however, it also became a point of contention for many of Morgan's own contemporaries. For one thing, it assured the usually dominating whites that they are no longer racist after reading it. According to Jackie Huggins the reason for the success of *My Place* was that 'It makes Aboriginality intelligible to non-aboriginals' (Huggins 61). In order to prove that white Australia's national morality was no longer predominantly monocultural, it was imperative that its minority subjects and their histories should be recognized.

Therefore there are two equally important expectations from a text like *My Place* and other such texts: On the one hand, the aboriginal community desires to portray indigenous experiences to be truthful and authentic for the white readers; on the other it also means that white Australia will have to change its pre-conceived notions of Aboriginality. Perhaps for the first time, texts such as *My Place* were produced with the intention of re-telling and recovering

indigenous life and histories. Morgan's text was the only indigenous work to emerge in 1987-88. There were Glenyse Word's *Wandering Girl* and Ruby Langford's *Don't Take your love to town*, among others. However it was Morgan's text that stole the limelight while other writers were dismissed. One of the reasons for this was that *My Place* provided the kind of representation that wasn't offensive to the white Australians. Secondly Morgan's text was recognized above others, not due to its literary quality, but because it presented in a balanced way the whole idea of such a recognition, because 'us' meant the majority culture. Morgan was quite aware of the fact that she was addressing both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences. Morgan intelligently interwove autobiographical writing with oral narrative. In an interview with Mary Wright, Sally Morgan says that she was first motivated to write *My Place*, an account of her own family history, by her anger at the injustice she perceived (Wright 10) and at the time Morgan was researching her book, government files about indigenous people were under the control of the police and not open to public. Patricia Crawford points out that it is difficult to describe what happened to Aboriginal people in the past without access to official records which are considered essential for historical writing. To overcome this difficulty, Sally Morgan employed the oral history approach which, as Paula Hamilton points out, emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as an effective method to reveal the hidden life history of oppressed people (Hamilton 482). Morgan frequently records the real spoken voices. On the other hand, Morgan as an author had to meet the demands and expectations of the wider readership.

The book *My Place* was Morgan's profoundly moving account of how she cajoled and gently bullied her family towards the truth about their collective aboriginal identity. Morgan pieced together a picture of generational dispossession and denial of land, of kinship of successive children stolen away, of wealthy white men who disowned them. But this was no uncomfortable history lesson from a half-forgotten era. The story was being told by a fresh-faced, intelligent young Australian woman. The simple and direct telling of the story affected almost everyone who read it.

It is not without significance, and because of a number of coincidences that marked its publication, that *My Place* is rated as one of the most outstanding Aboriginal Australian texts. Although an autobiography, or family story, *My Place* expands its literary and cultural meanings beyond its genre; it becomes an alternate history, a retelling of the Aboriginal roots and connections, which challenging the suppressed or unacknowledged past of people. *My Place* is about Morgan's quest for knowledge of her family's past and the fact that he has grown up under false pretences and critics opines that: "Sally's story begins with a quest for identity" (Gare and Crawford 80) ; ".....the protagonists undertake a journey to discover their roots, their place which helps them to discover their identities" (Jaireth 75) and "My Place deals primarily with the personal themes of family and identity with special reference to the Aboriginals of Australia...." (Mitra and Dhawan 49). *My Place* is the story of three Aboriginal women, Sally, Glad and Nan, who found their futures and their pasts. It is the story of them finding their Aboriginal heritages, or returning to their Aboriginal heritages. As Morgan describes:

"How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known our place" (233).

Aboriginal people and the intruders who broke into their seclusion have been curious about each other, right from the start. Each side could see how different the other was, and the better they knew each other, the longer they lived side by side, the more difficult it became. Neither knew how to yield, and neither wanted to very much. The Europeans took their superiority for granted, and unfortunately for the black people, it was the European who won. They occupied not only the land but also the minds, the thinking, of those they overcame. Sally Morgan opines- as you can see, "I'm trying to locate it, to put it somewhere is about a family who don't acknowledge their aboriginality, who in fact don't even know about it, the book is about their struggle to find out who they are and where, if anywhere, they belong; it's about the resistance of Nan (Daisy) and Mum (Gladys) to this search; it's about the eventual weakening of their resistance in the face of Sally Morgan's determination and it is about the discovery of the links the family has in places for the north of Perth, where Sally and her family go searching, and find some at least of what is they need" (257).

*My Place* interweaves autobiographical writing with oral narratives recorded, transcribed fully by Morgan. There are three transcribed narratives: the first by Morgan's uncle Arthur Corunna, the second by Morgan's mother Gladys's, the third by her grandmother Daisy. Each chapter preceding a narrative details the process leading up to the subject's agreement to speak. *My Place* connects itself with two issues: the pressure from indigenous protest movements leading to a new political awareness in the nation about 'collective bad conscience' and white guilt regarding colonial/neo-colonial plight of Australia's indigenous population and the royal commission (1987) that started investigating the experiences of imprisoned indigenous Australians. This was the silenced episode in the country's racist past that was subsequently addressed in the Stolen Generations, concluding that the forcible removal of children from families and communities to white foster families affected the destiny of every indigenous family (Haebich 15). Morgan's family circumstances were structurally embedded in this assimilation and the autobiographical search for her aboriginal past became part of the wider discussion of the issue of Australianness. The present injustices triggered anger towards the past. Morgan's recovery of aboriginality and personal history is locked into the past because she had not suffered directly the moments of family disintegration and displacement, though she and her siblings had to cope with its traumatic circumstances and results. She had been instructed by her grandmother to tell her classmates a lie about her origin.

There is a certain sense of achievement in the words '*My Place*' which isn't present in the first half of the book, when Sally Morgan's family is in denial mode. The turning point is reached when Arthur Corunna, Nan's brother, feels the need to tell his story, he makes his journey back to his home country-his place-to die. Once Arthur's story has been written down, and read back to Mum (Gladys), she begins to change her mind, and she too records her story. And Nun yields a little, at least enough to let her grandchildren bond with her and her experiences and some of them still kept secret, so that they are at peace with her and she with them when she goes to hospital for the last time. By now the children who had been told they were 'Indian' – because of their coloured skin-were proud of being aboriginal. They had become aware of their connections with people and places for from Perth, and they had slipped out from under the feelings of shame and worthlessness which went with being native.

So Gladys's five children by a white father are told, after his death, that the dark skin which causes the other children at their school to comment comes from the fact that they are of

Indian descent. Arthur's, Nan's and Mum's story tells us that a 'tenuous sense of identity' is a problem for most aboriginal people because their certainties have been invaded as well as their land. Arthur Corunna's story traces the older aborigine background and history of people who are hybrid and with split identity. Arthur in his story tells about the non-recognition and oppression and segregation of aborigines at the hands of white colonizers. The story provides Morgan with an authentic framework in telling the history of her family and community. Arthur's story in *My Place* becomes almost a chronicle of aboriginal history in Australia as a memory of both tolerance and resistance against the white oppressor. He forcefully asserts history as something 'everyone should read' because the future generations cannot easily understand what it means 'to be a blackfella', his difficulties 'to live the way he wants' (252). Arthur does not want his story to be lost in the white narrative of Australia's foundation, but wants his uniquely indigenous experience to be acknowledged- an experience that speaks not of certainties, gains and victories but of losses, contradictions and complications.

Arthur, through his own condition presents to us the condition of the half-castes. The half-caste who is not initiated, does not know aboriginal law, nor does he know the whitefella law. The half-caste is almost entirely cut off from the sources of aboriginal life, without being put in contact with the sources of whitefella life. He is a problem created by a problem, which hasn't been solved and the only solution the white society can think of is to seize the half-caste children and treat them as poor whites, separating them from their aboriginal mothers and fathers. This important facet of aboriginal children in colonial times is aptly understood in Australian history as the story of 'Stolen Generations'. They are then brought up as inferior whites as a way of denying the co-existence of equal but different civilizations. Arthur says:

Aah, I always wish I'd never left there. It was my home. Sometimes, I wish I'd been born black as the ace of spades, then they'd never have took me. They only took half-castes. They took Albert and they took me and Katie, our friend. They told my mother and the others we'd be back soon. They didn't realise they wouldn't be seeing us no more. (237)

Arthur's story in this sense is a mix of nostalgia, memory, protest and anguish about conditions and compulsions over which he and others have no control. Arthur continues:

When they came to get me, I clung to my mother and tried to sing them. I wanted them to die. I was too young. I didn't know how to sing them properly. I cried and cried calling to my mother, 'I don't want to go, I don't want to go' She was my favorite. I loved her. I called, 'I want to stop with you, I want to stop with you' I never saw her again. (237)

Arthur wants to be within reach of the land he knows is his, that he belongs to. So does Sally. There is a push inside her that moves her, only semi-consciously, towards her goal. Arthur's story has taken her some of the way; she feels stuck; she decides that she and her (white) husband will take their children north to look for new leads. Mum (Gladys) says this is a silly idea, and Nan (Daisy) agrees. 'It's a waste of money, you're chasing the wind. You go up there and the cyclone'll get you. 'But Sally is determined and visit places far from the north of Perth.

Daisy's voice is the final one to be recorded that helps Sally to know about her aborigine past and heritage. Daisy through her own story tells us about the condition and treatment meted out to blacks and aborigines as they had to wait in lines for their food, were not properly fed, given punishments such as beating etc. and were not secure in their jobs. Daisy, unlike Arthur, is not ready to reveal the past heritage. Daisy is fearful of saying too much: 'I got to be careful what I say. You cannot put no lies in a book' (325). There are many reasons why Daisy is reluctant to share her story. A crucial factor is her need to avoid painful losses, such as that of having to give up her first child: 'I was not allowed to keep it. That was the way of it then. I never told anyone I was carrying Gladdie' (419). Daisy's experience has taught her that if she shares anything that is important, it is taken away from her; as a result she is fearful of the consequences telling her story might entail.

Glady's narrative is often overlooked in critical responses to *My Place* which usually devote most attention to the narratives of Arthur and Daisy, yet it is arguably the most revealing. Glady is caught between her mother's fierce denial of any aboriginal heritage and her daughter's relentless questioning of the past. She does not consider her Aboriginality as limiting her identity or her ability to connect with majority culture. She thinks it better to share her past with majority culture because in the past she was not allowed to reveal it and suppresses it.

As *My Place* deals with quest for Aboriginal identity, another major attempt is to stress inclusion in a family; inclusion in a community; inclusion in a nation. It will be true to say that the portrayal of several conflicts with the white society, *My Place* neither condemns nor forgives Australia's racist past. The text includes as many aboriginal elements in it as is possible indicating hybridity of the modern Aboriginal culture. *My Place* as a literary text became catalyst for a new way of negotiating cultural representation and recognition. As a post-colonial text, *My Place* explores the positive possibility of re-constructing and re-telling different histories and silenced voices which are essential to understand one's location of self and community. As Lizzy Finn opines:

*My Place* is representative of a new way of thinking about indignity, one that is interested in the problems of being recognized by a white society, while also celebrating such recognition's possibilities (Finn, 24).

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