

# Unearthing the Truth in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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**Abstract—** *Autobiography is considered one of the most widely used genres in Australian Aboriginal literature. Some aboriginal authors focus on the oral background of indigenous autobiographies and others emphasize the historical factors. Storytelling has always been an essential part of an Aboriginal society as it represents the continuation of their unique culture and these stories revolve around life experiences. Not only is it valuable for the Indigenous people of Australia but also the Stolen Generation gets reconnected with their roots. Aboriginal autobiographies are primarily woven around oral backgrounds and storytelling techniques. European colonization has profoundly affected the lives of the Aboriginals of Australia. Colonization has snatched their history, identity, and native culture. The Aboriginal women authors through their autobiographies have regained their lost identities. Sally Morgan's *My Place* is a story about the search for her Aboriginal roots and heritage. According to Newman Sally Morgan's *My Place* "plays an important role in Australian Aboriginal literature because for the first time it provides non- Aboriginal readers with knowledge of hidden indigenous history" ("Race, Gender and Identity: *My Place* as autobiography, *Who's Place?*") Sally Morgan in her biographical book *My Place* presents the storytelling mode deeply connected with Aboriginal identity. This paper traces the effect of her grandmother's oral stories on Sally Morgan's life.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Aboriginal, Autobiography, Oral Tradition, Storytelling.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*My Place* opens with a very heart-touching paragraph written by Sally Morgan to her family

*To My Family*

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.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* not only narrates an emotional journey towards the recovery of personal and historic aboriginal presents and pasts but has also changed the perspective of Indigenous history in Australia. The uniqueness of *My Place* is that the characters speak from an Aboriginal point of view and reveal their identity with pride. The book is chronologically structured into four sections. The novel opens with Sally's younger years and general facts about school, father, and home. But an important twist takes place in the first part where Sally discovers her Aboriginal lineage. The second section is very cleanly dedicated to Sally's uncle Arthur, the third section is given exclusively to her mother Gladys and the fourth one is devoted to her grandmother Daisy. Unfortunately till the age of fifteen, Sally was not exposed to her Aboriginal heritage. Sally finds it difficult to accept that her family members were Aboriginal and strongly refuses to remain quiet and questions Nan "What people are we?" If Nan was Aboriginal why didn't she just say so?" (131) In Sally Morgan's novel *My Place*, a lot of social stigmas were attached to the term 'Aboriginals' and that is the reason why they were forced to hide the truth about the past of their people from their children. Jill describes the social stigma of Aboriginals "It's a terrible thing to be Aboriginal. Nobody wants to know you, not just Susan. You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian., anything, but not Aboriginal! I suppose it's alright for someone like you, you don't care what people think You don't anyone, but I do need" (122)

Sally's grandmother Daisy always had a hidden fear of losing her children. To protect her children and grandchildren from the process of forced removal she was lying about her lineage. One day Sally's grandmother without her knowledge reveals the secret of her Aboriginal past "You bloody kids don't want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black!" (120). After discovering the truth Sally in her book describes the pain of being called an Aboriginal "the feeling that a very vital part of me is missing and that I'd never

belonged to anywhere. Never resolve anything” (9) This new revelation about Nan left Sally stunned. “For the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan’s coloring. 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. (120). After identifying her lost Noongar heritage the young Sally is hopeful of beginning her book and says “Before we have nothing. At least now, we’ve got a beginning” (13). Sally was kept in darkness about her lineage till she decided to write a book on her family. Sally boldly voices out her own identity and all the untold life stories of her family in this book. “I want to write the history of my own family” (207). Sally laments about her people losing their identity, children being forcibly taken away from their families, and the history of the Aboriginal people not being recorded.

Well, there’s almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the White man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything There’s a lot of our history which we can’t even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won’t release them..... Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away.....I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story. (208)

Sally’s *My Place* has been considered an Indigenous record of “history” in Australia. Most of the Indigenous autobiographies have carried Aboriginal writing from the margins to the mainstream. Autobiography has always been considered one of the most widely used genres in Aboriginal literature. Autobiography is a genre that combines the functions of both historical and literary textual devices. Sally Morgan, I privately weave her story with autobiographical memories and true oral narrations. The uniqueness of Indigenous people is that they preserve their history not as a written document but through oral history. Oral traditions played an integral role in the lives of the aboriginals as these traditions tell the people who they are, where they are headed and where they came from. In Aboriginal society oral

traditions carried various experiences from one generation to another. Aboriginal cultures stressed the need to remember their origins, culture, histories, mothers, and grandmothers. The Native American writer Marmon Silko in an interview emphasizes the importance of stories:

Stories give identity to a place...That’s how you know, that’s how you belong, that’s how you know you belong if the stories incorporate you into them...In a sense, you are told who you are, or you know who you are by the stories that are told about you. (qt in Evers 74)

The impact of colonization and forced removal of Aboriginals from their roots, family, tribe, language, and the place had affected their lives drastically. Walia correctly states that “colonization is accompanied by exploitation, annexation, and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on. Thus a part of the world was not able to enjoy supremacy because it convinced the world about white man’s burden’ and his civilizing machine” (Walia,2001)

Sally Morgan with the help of three eye-opening oral narratives gives the story a new dimension. Morgan tries to get the first-hand oral narrative from her Aboriginal uncle Arthur Corunna, her mother Gladys, and her grandmother Daisy. The stunning revelations made by the three family members are representations of the sufferings of the Aboriginals, forced removal, and racial discrimination. Sally has led the narratives of the minor characters while writing e autobiography of her family since these characters play a vital role in linking the story Arthur, Gladys and Daisy were victims of the White Assimilation policy. The chief motive of this policy was to force the Aboriginals to blend into the White culture through the process of removing children from their families. The ultimate intention of the colonizers is to destroy the Aboriginal society and break the family ties. Sally was too stubborn to know more about her family history and she started unearthing the stories which were buried in the grave for years. Gladys, Arthur, and Daisy Corunna were victims of “**living under the Act**” where they were forcibly detached from their own family and land. The Indigenous children were

forcefully removed from their families to be sent on missions or government settlements and were taught Christian values by the White people. Christianity was supposed to be the religion of civilization and the Aboriginals were pagan.

Arthur and Daisy were the children of an Aboriginal woman and the White station master on whose farm she worked and lived. Arthur speaks about his parents "My mother's name was Annie Padewani and my father was Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman, the white station-owner"(222) The Aboriginal women were exploited by the white men and they couldn't even disclose the name of the father of her child. Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman was the father of Arthur and Daisy but the white society never openly accepted it and they considered Maltese Sam to be Arthur's and Daisy's father. Arthur recalls how he got this name "That's when I got the name of Arthur"(222) Arthur lost his religion "The first thing they did was Christen us" (232) Arthur was a living example of the government policy of forced removal where the names of the children were often changed. It was one of the government policies between 1910 and 1970.

Arthur opens his conversation and says that he is not aware of his age. "I can't tell you how old I am exactly, because I don't know" (222). While giving the interview to Sally Arthur goes back to his childhood days when he along with his brother Albert were forced to learn English, had to learn their table manners and also learned about Christianity. The White Colonizers had come to civilize the Aboriginals. While talking about religion Arthur angrily says "Take the white people in Australia, they brought the religion herewith them and the Commandment. Thou Shalt Not Steal, and yet they stole this country. They took it from the innocent. You see, they twisted the religion. (268) Arthur describes how he was taken away from his mother and was forced to change himself "She trained Albert to write on a slate with chalk. He had to speak English and learn the White man's ways and table manners....She also gave us what you call religious instruction. We learned all about saints"(227). Arthur contrary to what he was forced to learn liked his mother tongue 'I liked my language, but I got good hiding if I spoke it. I had to talk in English....I used to call to my mother in my language, 'Save me meat'(227) As the conversation

was becoming interesting Arthur by now had turned into a White man "I was a white man then, not black. It was a king's life" (257). While he was about to end his interview he wanted to advise the future generation but he stops saying every Aboriginal must save his land, language, and religion "You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn't over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against aborigines...no difference between black and who ' , we are all Australian, that's a lie, I tell you... the government's been robbin' him blind for years. They want us to be assimilated into the White, but don't want to be"(266). Arthur strongly opposes how the white people stole their sacred land and children and dominated the women, culture, and language "they brought the religion here with them and the commandment, Thou Shalt Not steal, and yet they stole the religion. They took it from the innocent. You see, they twisted religion.

Gladys in her interview admits that she can't remember her past much "I have no memory of being taken from my mother and placed in Parkerville Children's Home, but all my life I've carried a mental picture of a little fat kid about three or four years old (304). Gladys recalls the age of five she was sent to George Turner. Gladys laments about not being able to live with her family and while watching movies she wanted to have a family of her own. Gladys describes her feelings "Often the films were quite heart-rending about gypsies stealing a child from a family....I always thought of myself as the stolen child"( 311). Gladys was away from her mother and being an Aboriginal kid her mother required a permit to travel on her land. Gladys sadly points out the factor whenever she enquired about her father Daisy used to avoid the question saying "You don't want to know about him, he died when you were small, but he loved you very much" (317) Gladys openly states that the Home where children were forcefully kept as inmates learned to hide their Aboriginality "The Home also taught us never to talk openly about being Aboriginal. It was something we were made to feel ashamed of" (330) Gladys had decided that she would never let her children know that they are Aboriginals. If they get to know and open their mouth then they would be taken away. While giving the interview Gladys admits that she had wanted to become White but now she feels embarrassed "I feel embarrassed now to think that, once I wanted to be white. As a child I even hoped a

white family would adopt me, a rich one, of course, I've changed since those days" (379)

Morgan's grandmother Daisy was born on Corunna Downs Station, in the North of Western Australia. Daisy's mother was Annie and her father was How Drake-Brockman, the station owner. Morgan's grandmother Daisy Corunna reveals the painful and brutal treatment faced by Noongar women, separation from family, and the process of survival encountered by them due to colonization. Daisy opened up in the book about the hardships she has faced, and how she was exploited and banned from freedom, community life, and motherhood. Daisy is fearful of saying too much "Aah, you see that's the trouble with us blackfellas, we don't know who we belong to, no one owns up. I got to be careful what I say. You can't put no lies in a book" (403.) Daisy recalls how her mother had wanted her to be educated, read and write like white people but at the age of fourteen or fifteen she was taken away from her mother. Why did they tell my mother that lie? .....God will make them pay for their lies. He's got people like that under his whip. They should have told my mother the truth. She thought I was coming back.... When I left I was crying 'g, all the people were crying 'g, my mother was crying and beat 'g her head...I called, 'Mum, Mum, Mum! She said don't forget me, Talahue!' (411) Sally Morgan's *My Place* struggles with the quest for Aboriginal identity. Finn describes in this context "*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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