



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Marginalization and Dispossession in Australian Aboriginal Writings: A Study in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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Abstract

Sally Morgan's *My Place* can be read as a 'counter memory' of colonialism. Aboriginal oral history produced in the form literature, serves as what Foucault would call a 'counter memory' of the violence dehumanization deculturation and dispossession to which Aboriginal people have been subjected, which has been omitted from official 'White' Australian histories. *My Place* challenges colonial history by bringing to the fore issues such as paternalism, loss of family relationships, land and language rights and the suppression of Aboriginal history post 1788. Sally Morgan uses autobiography as a mode only to allow the emotional elements of experience such as love, suffering, displacement, the search for meaning and identity come to the foreground. *My Place* is Sally Morgan's journey into her past and an effort to highlight the silence of the marginalized and repressed aborigines. She relates her own story, beginning with her childhood, she tells the life histories of her

Aboriginal grandmother – Nan, her mother - Gladys, and other aboriginal relatives like uncle Arthur Corunna, her grandmother’s brother. The book records the marginalization, dehumanization and dispossession of the aborigines of Australia. *My Place* is the story of the loss of their place, in their own country. They were dispossessed of their land, their place, their culture and forced into assimilation. It was the politics of wiping away aboriginal identity. They were never included in the mainstream of economic and political life. Sally records this obliteration in three generations of her own family. Her grandmother who knew her past and was afraid to talk about it, her mother who had married a ‘White’ man, and did not tell the children about their aboriginal roots, and Sally herself, who never knew her true identity.

Keywords

Marginalization; Dispossession; Australian Aboriginal Writings; Sally Morgan; *My Place*.

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Sally Morgan has presented in *My Place* an analytical representation of various forms of oppression on the aboriginals – now they were dispossessed and pushed into oblivion. The identity formations of the colonizers and the obliteration of the colonized as Mudrooroo puts it, “Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the White Man. It is a cry for justice”(130). Remembering the past is actually, “putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present and of the history of race and racism”. Memory is the submerged portion of the human consciousness; therefore the repressed and silenced results of colonial erasures of cultural memories need to be resurrected from the unconscious. The hostile memories of the past when the imperialistic politics had intended to wipe off the identity of the Australian aboriginals are resurrected in Sally Morgan's *My Place*. It can be read as a counter brutalization of the aboriginals which history fails to record. It

challenges the colonial history bringing to the foreground issues of paternalism, abuse of the aboriginal women by the colonizers, broken family relationship, forcible acquisition of land, wiping off aboriginal languages and replacing it with English and issues of class, gender, race and suppression of history post 1788 are taken up in the book.

In 1901, Australia was empowered by Britain “to legislate in relation to any race of people except ‘aboriginal natives’ It was advised that ‘aboriginal natives’ should continue to be excluded from the law as such they remained under the jurisdiction of the Department Flora and Fauna. This strategy imposes a history of invasion and violence that has brutalized the aboriginal societies, cultures and language groups. Official history has served to marginalize ‘aboriginal’ people, their customs, traditions and beliefs, and ensured a privileged place for ‘white’ knowledge’s, customs and beliefs as the foundation of Australian Society. ‘White’ Australian Culture has come to be considered the natural, central dominant culture of Australia which is passed on through birthright. British imperialism and politics has thus facilitated the legitimation of ‘white’ Australian history — ‘White’ dominance, ‘White’ Australian Policy, paternal attitudes to ‘Aborigines’, ‘Aboriginal’ subjugation and marginalisation is subsequently justified through the domination of ‘White’ social, political, economic relationships. We know how everything designated ‘Aboriginal’ was silenced, othered, and excluded.

Sally Morgan’s *My Place* can be read as a ‘counter memory’ of colonialism. Aboriginal oral history produced in the form literature, serves as what Foucault would call a ‘counter memory’ of the violence dehumanization deculturation and dispossession to which Aboriginal people have been subjected, which has been omitted from official ‘White’ Australian histories. *My Place* challenges colonial history by bringing to the fore issues such as paternalism, loss of family relationships, land and language rights and the suppression of Aboriginal history post 1788. Sally Morgan uses autobiography

as a mode only to allow the emotional elements of experience such as love, suffering, displacement, the search for meaning and identity come to the foreground. *My Place* is Sally Morgan's journey into her past and an effort to highlight the silence of the marginalized and repressed aborigines. She relates her own story, beginning with her childhood, she tells the life histories of her Aboriginal grandmother – Nan, her mother - Gladys, and other aboriginal relatives like uncle Arthur Corunna, her grandmother's brother. The book records the marginalization, dehumanization and dispossession of the aborigines of Australia. *My Place* is the story of the loss of their place, in their own country. They were dispossessed of their land, their place, their culture and forced into assimilation. It was the politics of wiping away aboriginal identity. They were never included in the mainstream of economic and political life. Sally records this obliteration in three generations of her own family. Her grandmother who knew her past and was afraid to talk about it, her mother who had married a 'White' man, and did not tell the children about their aboriginal roots, and Sally herself, who never knew her true identity.

Morgan in the search for identity seeks to expose the injustice and exploitation meted out to the natives by the rulers. Her search provides the in-depth knowledge of her aboriginal roots with its untold stories of the dispossessed and violated aboriginals. The stories she narrates reveal attitudes and living conditions of the Aborigines which are not recorded in the official history. Morgan writes:

...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 are all sorts of files about Aborigines that go way back, and the government won't release them... And they don't like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their

power when they were supposed to be, Protectors of Aborigines that it's not funny! I mean, our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to 'White' people." (161)

In 1905 Western Australian Aborigines Act (based on the 1897 Queensland Aborigines Act) was used as a blue print for the establishment of Apartheid in South Africa. The Western Australian Act while ostensibly aimed at improving the welfare of Aboriginal people, actually resulted in disempowering them by setting regulations that controlled every aspect of their lives. For example aborigines were not allowed to live in towns, enter towns at night, to own property to attend government schools or to bring up their own children. The western Australian Protection Act suppressed the Aboriginal people mercilessly.

This paper examines the racist acts of repression, subjugation and the dehumanization of the Aborigines of Australia in the context of history and memory- as brought out in *My Place*. The psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized aborigines in forced assimilation and loss of aboriginal identity is brought out through the life-stories of Arthur and Daisy Corunna, Gladys Milroy and Sally Morgan. This fascinating book reveals through their reminiscences the atrocities and the brutalization of the aborigines in Australia in colonial times. Through the memories and images of her and Daisy her grandmother, and Arthur her grand-uncle, from the echoes that emerge and take shape in the it stories hidden knowledge is uncovered and a story of pain and trauma of the Aborigines in colonized Australia is revealed. The history of Australia written by the White colonizers never mentioned the truth about these repressive measures. As they tell their stories Sally makes the reader aware of the racist acts and patriarchal violence they had experienced.

The Aboriginal or half-caste children were the wards of the state and were forcefully removed from their Aboriginal parents or single parent and taken to the Missions. The Aboriginal children were placed in the Missions and reserves at the discretions of the Protectors and when they left the reserves they had to carry permits. The Aborigines were employed as domestic servants in the households of the White people. It was illegal for a white man to marry an Aboriginal woman without the Protector's permission. Aboriginal people could be arrested without warrant, under 1905 Act. White colonizers were not allowed to socialize with Aboriginal people or have relationship with them. There were many reserves and in Western Australia including Marble Bar and Port Hedland, and the most notorious reserve where the Aborigines were tortured was Moor River Native Settlement. Helen Bunda, Daisy's cousin suffered and died there due to torture.

All the native reserves were supervised by the police under section 46 of the Native Administration Act, half-caste children were forcibly removed from their Native parent and had to be placed in the homes run by the Missions. Gladys was forcefully taken away from her mother Daisy and placed in Parkerville Home, which was run by the church and referred to as the Mission. The white parent paid for the upkeep of the child. The children were kept under strict control, they were ill-treated and many died. They were taught the English way of life and to speak the English language. When Daisy came to see Gladys at Parkerville, Gladys wanted to leave the Mission to go away with her mother but she was not allowed to go. She was allowed to leave the Mission only when she was fourteen years old. Often the light-skinned children were adopted by white families. All the children were given basic education taught domestic duties, in the Mission Homes, when they were fourteen they were sent to white families to work as domestic-servants with no pay. The trauma of being forcefully snatched away from their parents and made to suffer in loneliness, and to watch other children suffer alike, left an indelible mark on

the scarred psyche of the Aborigines. In these Homes they gradually lost touch with their own Aboriginal culture, and tradition and language for purposes of forced assimilation. In the book Gladys and Sally do not speak aboriginal languages only Nan and Arthur are able to speak their own language. As they belong to an older generation. It was the Government policy to stop the use of Aboriginal languages.

The white official histories omitted the violence and deculturation to which the aboriginal people had been subjected.

By the 30's most (Aborigines) were trapped in a cycle of poverty characterized - by long periods of unemployment, deplorable living condition, malnutrition, disease and premature death. Their children were growing up without schooling or vocational training. Discriminatory laws and a repressive administration had shaped them into second class citizens, rejected and despised by the White community; they had become outcasts in their own land. (128)

Few Australians know of the marginalization, degradation and brutalization of Aborigines that resulted from the 1905 Act. Sally Morgan combines both historical and literary textual discourse. It includes the themes of suffering, displacement, exploitation, forced assimilation, the 'white man's burden' juxtaposed to a search for meaning and identity within the old aboriginal context, to identify with their own heritage and culture and to restore the dignity of the Aborigines in Australia. In this context Morgan says,

I want to write the story of my own family there is almost nothing written from the personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it's 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 we can't even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aborigines that go way back and the government won't release them. You take

the old police files they're not even controlled by Battye Library; they're controlled by the police. And they don't like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police, abusing their power when they are supposed to be protectors of Aborigines. Our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families were destroyed by government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people.(163-4)

Sally Morgan in *My Place* shows the interconnectedness of history and autobiography. Sally read widely about the history of Western Australia where the Aboriginal settlements existed she wrote, "I wanted to read up about Aborigines. I found out there was a lot to be ashamed of. Aborigines were considered sub-normal and not capable of being educated the way whites were. The pastoral industry was built on the back of aboriginal labour. Aboriginal people were forced to work and if they didn't the station-owner called the police.

One of the most obvious acts of racism uncovered in the text is the amount of hidden or covered up information about family's Aboriginality. For example Gladys (Sally's mother) does not know who her father was, her father's name was not mentioned on her birth certificate, there were no records of the parentage of the half caste children. When she journeys to the North, she finds that hundreds of kids had been taken away. Through Morgan's inner journey the reader is able to comprehend the nature of racism and Aboriginality in Colonial Australia and the discrimination which extended even up to the seventies and eighties of the last century. Morgan's cultural heritage is central to her own growth and development. Her mother and grandmother belonged to 'stolen generation' much of her family's history is representative of the pain and hopelessness for generations of Aborigines. "I wanted to cry. I hated myself when I got like that, I never cried, and yet since all this had been going on, I'd

wanted to cry often it was absurd. There was so much about myself that I didn't understand" (158). The stories record the mistreatment of the Aborigines, poor conditions of living, poverty in their home-land, rape, children taken from their parents, social isolation and ostracism.

Sally's efforts began in the 1980's and now more and more Aboriginal writers are coming forth in a joint effort to raise a voice which had been silenced so long. Glenyse Ward, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Mudrooroo Narogin and many other Aboriginal writers are also involved in recording their life stories. Collectively these stories provide some understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal people. They act as a 'counter memory', as record of displacement and deculturation as opposed to official Australian accounts of settlement and civilization. To conclude in the words of Ferrier *My Place* is significant because - "in the history of Aboriginal people, having been often forced to know their place, in the White colonizers scheme of things, finding a place within the dominant institutions from which to speak and resist becomes a strategy of opposition"(60).

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Rasheed, Haroon. "Marginalization and Dispossession in Australian Aboriginal Writings: A Study in Sally Morgan's *My Place*." *Literary Quest* 1.11 (2015): 7-16. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.