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Anecdotes of Tempestuous Childhood in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to represent the childhood of 'stolen generations' as Sally Morgan, an Australian Aboriginal writer, depicts in her autobiography/'ethno-autobiography'; *My Place* (1987). Some of the significant issues discussed are; general concept of childhood, the way colonialism in Australia moulds the childhood of the Aboriginals, the manner in which Aboriginal Protection Acts devastate the innocent childhood of the Aboriginals, the type of nightmarish experiences Aboriginal children go through in their tender age, the kind of juvenile memory these kids possess, and the impact memory plays in their lives when they recall their reminiscences, the manner these experiences of childhood affect their present as well as future generations, if affects, the reasons and process they affect, whether these children really have the so-called childhood or forced to be adults by the social structures they live in.

Keywords

Sally Morgan; Stolen generations; Aboriginals; Colonialism; Ethno-autobiographies; Aboriginal Protection Acts; *My Place*.

“I cried and cried, calling to my mother, ‘I don’t want to go, I don’t want to go!’ ... I want to stop with you, I want to Stop with you!’ I never saw her again” (Morgan 182). These lines illustrate the heartbreaking grief of Arthur, a child, separated from his mother, Annie. It also portrays his forced alienation and detachment from his mother and community.

Childhood is generally considered to be the time of happiness filled with fun and games. It is associated with carefree life, a time filled with nursery rhymes and a time when a child is pampered. It is also associated with schooling, education and other learning activities. It’s a time of learning, fun and frolic. Childhood stress is related to school and homework but home is a place of happiness and comfort. Such is the hypothesis of childhood. Also, children are thought to be same everywhere with same problems. Childhood has been, from ages, viewed as homogenous category. But it is not true in the case of Aboriginal children as their childhood consists of heterogeneous elements. For them the happiness of childhood is an illusion/ a mirage. The romanticisation of childhood experiences is introspected and rethought by the readers and critics with the emergence of New Literatures in English (generally known as Common Wealth or Post-Colonial Literature).

Childhood is the most essential phase of any person’s life. The developmental psychologists, right from Sigmund Freud, consider this span to be the most essential period as it determines 75% of one’s adulthood or future. Children are very receptive in this span and whatever they experience at this age deeply gets rooted into their subconscious and unconscious psyche. Whatever a person is, as an adult, is the effect of his/her past experiences. I

argue that childhood is not a mere phase of one's life rather it works as a foundation for the adulthood or futurity. Childhood becomes significant part of life as it acts as a predetermining force to a person's life. And childhood is predetermined by the range of opportunities one enjoys as a child; educationally, economically, socially and culturally. Thus, an adult is nothing but the amount of experiences s/he comes across and stores them in memory throughout her/his childhood. As the juvenile memory has such an enormous impact on the future of every person I would like to look at the way Sally Morgan portrays the childhood of the 'stolen generations' in her *My Place* which is 'Ethno-autobiographical' in nature; as it speaks for the Aboriginal children whose innocent childhood has been ruthlessly devastated by the white colonisers' legislative policies that are supposed to protect the Aboriginals.

Sally Morgan narrates her own experiences and her ancestors' genealogical experiences as children and adults in order to denounce the painful silence imposed on the non-whites that results in their marginalization and exclusion from official history and culture. She focuses on the childhood experiences of her community which have been excluded from the huge body of mainstream Anglo-Celtic literature. *My Place* is a recount of neglected, silenced and forgotten history of 'stolen generations' at different points of time in the past.

Sally Morgan uses the technique of selection and focus to provide examples of racist attitudes prevalent in Australian society that she and her ancestors encounter, which lead to social discrimination and dehumanization. *My Place* becomes a testimonial speaking for all the Aboriginals in general and 'stolen generations', in particular. Sally's text becomes a 'voice' for the 'voiceless' that have been pushed into the periphery and/or made invisible from Australian society for hundreds of years. She uses memory as a tool to address their experience as children. Their childhood memory plays significant role to express their daily activities, intricacies and realities of their collective-lives.

These Aboriginal children, in their minds eyes, retrospectively look back in anger at the social system that discriminates and dehumanizes them at all spheres of life. While looking back at the past the then childhood naïve experiences take mature shapes in expression.

Sally Morgan's search for her roots begins with an uncertain identity. When her classmates enquire about her identity at school Sally begins to speculate upon her identity. As a result, she asks her grandmother who in return suggests her to tell that she is an Indian. Similarly, as Suneetha Rani discusses, Roberta Sykes suffers from an uncertain identity as "... her mother confuses her with changing versions of it instead of helping her to solve the riddle..." (38). Further, Suneetha Rani opines that for Roberta Syke's identity becomes a "traumatic situation" as it "has become a riddle for her and a source of curiosity for the outside world..." (38). Sally Morgan's text becomes significant and intriguing not because of her own childhood experiences but it's because of the juvenile reminiscence of her Aboriginal ancestors whose haunting, nightmarish and traumatising memory offers us the complete picture of Aboriginal childhood. *My Place* suggests that juvenile experiences form an inseparable part of our memory; the memory that becomes omniscient in life. Juvenile reminiscences, being the perpetual-contact and integral part of our psyche, haunt us even after we become grown-ups. Daisy, Arthur, Gladys and other characters in the text recall their childhood anecdotes vividly, indicating that childhood is always part of adult life an all-pervading presence of one's life. Interestingly, all the characters in the text burst out like volcanoes while they recall their childhood memories. Sally tries to implicitly theorise her ancestors' childhood saga by critically analysing the impact of Aboriginal Protection Acts upon the lives of the Aboriginals. Her narration describes about the childhood trauma and anguish that are invaded due to established institutions during the white man's regime. The text is an unbelievable

investigation into the consequences of Aboriginal Protection Acts (1869, 1905, 1909 & 1961) in Australia.

Some of the main characters in *My Place*; Annie, Daisy, Arthur, Albert, Gladys, Sally and her siblings present agonizing Aboriginal-childhood experiences during and after the colonial regime. Separation, abandonment, loneliness, humiliation, ill-treatment, abduction, poverty, hunger, physical and mental abuse, vulnerability, psychological and emotional turmoil, exploitation, oppression, harassment, inferiority-complex and so on are the composition of the Aboriginal childhood experiences they treasure due to callous rule of the whites. The policies brutally affect every sphere of Aboriginal life in pre and post-colonial Australia. The Aboriginals are socially segregated, culturally devastated, politically dominated, economically exploited and spiritually subjugated.

My Place presents how the scarcity of White women and lawlessness of White men in colonial times led to sexual exploitation of the Aboriginal women by the colonizers. The white-men forgot the rudimentary morality which is supposed to be the criterion of human beings. Consequently a new race is formed, commonly known as 'half caste', and called by many names like 'mixed- blood', 'cross-breed', 'quadroons', 'octoroons' 'hybreeds' etc. The children of such union are usually disowned by their White 'fathers'. This dilemma of 'belonging to none'- the feeling of fatherlessness is both embarrassing and depressing, and haunts the thoughts of such children throughout life. The children born to unwed mothers are subjected to 'ridicule' and 'derogation' by their friends and society. In one of such instances Gladys sorrowfully recollects her childhood experiences that, "but she (Daisy) didn't know about all the teasing I used to get because I didn't have a father, nor the comments that I used to hear about bad girls having babies" (Morgan 251). Psychological turmoil of Gladys erupts into volcano when she shares her

juvenile experiences of school indicating the suppressed pain of her sub-conscious psyche.

Arthur, Daisy, Albert, Gladys and many others do not precisely know who their fathers are. Sally Morgan enquires with different people like Mrs. Alice and other Aboriginals at Corunna Downs about the real fathers of her ancestors. This fact of not knowing one's father creates a 'bastard complex' in children and traumatizes their psyche for the rest of their lives. It also results in identity crisis or uncertain identity for such children.

While narrating his childhood experience, Arthur tells Sally, "my mother's name was Annie Padewani and my father was Alfred Drake-Brokeman, the white Station owner...., he shared my aboriginal father's two wives, Annie and Ginnie" (175). Further, Daisy expresses in an alarmed voice to Sally "Aah, you see, that's the trouble with us blackfellas, we don't know who we belong to, no one'll own up" (325). Non-possession of the Aboriginal children by the white men reminds us of some of the male animal species that just release their sperms in the female animal and go away not bothering what happens next. This also exhibits the white attitude towards women; treating women merely as sexual objects to quench their lust. Peter Pierce correctly points out the condition of the Aboriginals during colonial regime:

...To 'open-up' the land for the pastoralism and agriculture, colonial governments enclosed Aboriginal people on mission stations and inadequately stabled. In them aboriginal people were subjugated to tight regulation, strict discipline and close surveillance. Some nuclear families were allowed to live together; others suffered the removal of the children to dormitories. (Pierce 54-55)

Surprisingly, Sally Morgan's *My Place* also successfully engages and reflects all these elements of living on mission stations, domestic jobs, and incompatibility with rules, strict discipline, close surveillance, nuclear family

system and separation from children/parents, staying in dormitories and becoming victims to all kinds of abuses.

In Western Australia the “1905 Australian Act” empowered the government to forcibly remove children from their aboriginal parents. Aboriginal children, especially those who were light skinned were removed with the hope that in a generation or two, they would be “assimilated” completely into white society. The full-blooded children were issued rations. Whites supported them silently until the race died out mainly from diseases introduced by the Europeans.

“Stolen generation” is a term used to describe the children of Australian-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who were removed from their families by the Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions. At least 100,000 children were removed from their parents. Nationally it can be concluded with confidence that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families or communities (wiki/stolen 22/04/11).

My Place, time and again, reminds that Colonialism has a drastic influence on the lives of the indigenous people. Communities have collapsed during colonialism. The traditional joint family system is reduced to nuclear families because of 1905 Australian Act (Aboriginal Protection Act). The children are removed from their parents to be ‘civilized’. Thus, children are not only distanced from their families but also the institution of family itself is started to become an issue of oblivion and bewilderment. Sally Morgan depicts heart-rending picture that the Aboriginal parents have to undergo when their children are torn from their arms, or are deceived into relinquishing their children for their own educational good. Education is a lure or ruse that whites have used against the Aboriginals in the name of ‘civilizing mission’.

While recalling his childhood’s saddest memory Arthur bursts into tears and recounts his mother’s agony he experiences, as the other Aboriginal

children and parents also do during separation. (182) Daisy also talks about her mother's bitter tears when she is separated: "When I left I was cryin' all the people were cryin', My mother was cryin' and beating her head.....I called 'Mum, mum, mum' I could hear their wailing for miles and miles..." (332).

Gladys also undergoes the agony of being separated from her mother Daisy. Gladys' mother works as a servant to the White family. Gladys is taken to a boarding school, but is allowed to spend some holiday breaks with her mother. When Gladys has her own children, her mother advises her not to tell children about their parentage: "Mum said, she didn't want the children growing up with the people looking down on them...Aboriginal were treated the lowest of the low" (305). However, it is not the only reason for depriving the children of knowledge of their Aboriginal roots but is a fear of separation from mother, which is more painful, that makes them hide their identity. Gladys constantly refers to the story of separation from her mother as a child. She tells that she has a longing to be with her mother when she stays at Mission Home. Therefore, when she herself becomes a mother, there is always the fear that government would take the children away from her. Gladys says, "Aboriginal women were not allowed to keep children fathered by a white man" (301). "...they take the white ones away because you weren't considered fit to raise a child with white blood" (336). Therefore, a Legatee is appointed to take care of such families. .Even, when a welfare-lady comes to "check-up" about the family details Gladys is so much frightened (304). They hide their children as a hen hides her chicks from the eyes of a hawk or an eagle. K.Suneetha Rani critically analyses and presents a full picture of Daisy thus:

Daisy Corunna presents the fear of the aboriginal people of humiliation and ill- treatment from white society and government and their effort to hide their Aboriginal identity in order to lead the life in a 'safe' 'secure' and 'respectable' manner. It is the voice of the Aboriginal woman exploited, played with and who has been

deprived of freedom , protection, community life and motherhood and who is being haunted by the threat of her Aboriginal identity being detected. (Rani 96)

Peter Pierce observes that “the emblematic lost child of modern Australia is a victim of white society itself; of abuse, abandonment or abduction” (Pierce 1).

Aboriginal children undergo not only the agony of separation from family and community but also a separation from the children within Aboriginal group as they are separated on the basis of complexion after being taken to mission homes. The darker kids are treated differently from the lighter skinned children. They are divided further into groups. Ill-treatment towards the lighter skinned kids is lesser than the darker skinned kids. The darker skinned children have to undergo sever corporal and mental punishments at the hands of authorities at the mission and welfare houses. This act exposes the racist attitude of the Whites.

As per the Aboriginal Protection Acts, the white government has the power to take away the children of the Aboriginal parents for education purpose. Such children are put in boarding schools under strict surveillance of a missionary caretaker. The caretakers who are supposed to treat the children with tender-loving-care turn out to be the most callous villains to the Aboriginal children. Sally brings out such hazardous and horrendous incidents through her text. Gladys retrospectively explains about the corporal punishments she has suffered at the hands of Miss Moore, a caretaker at Parkerville children’s home as “She grabbed me by the arm and started belting me across the head. It was nothing new; she’d given me beltings before. Sometimes, she hit me so much I’d go deaf for a couple of days” (258). Further, Arthur’s sufferings are inexplicable at the hands of Mr Coulson, his caretaker. Arthur reminisces:

By the time, he was just about boiling over. He shoved us all in a dormitory, locked the door and told us to strip off. Then, when we

were naked, he raced around the dormitory like a mad man, beating us with a long cane over the head and body. He didn't care where he hit us; he just beat us and beat us till we bled. There were bits of blood everywhere... He beat me harder and harder, my thighs were running with blood and I still wouldn't cry for him... (Morgan 186)

Sally portrays the ways in which Arthur, Gladys, Daisy become the scapegoats in their childhood under the cruel colonialism and its legislative policies that are claimed to 'civilize' and protect the innocent Aboriginals and their children. The Aboriginal children are further segregated among themselves on the basis of light and dark skin.

Gladys, Arthur, Daisy and other Aboriginal children suffer loneliness and desertion in the mission schools. Their fate is equally tragic. Anxiety about their parents would always prick their conscience. They feel that they are the people without roots and are always conscious that something is missing in their lives. That's why Arthur and Gladys say that they as well as the other children are used to drench their pillows with tears because of unbearable physical and mental trauma. 'Adoption' brings chaos in Aboriginal children's lives. This becomes one of the major themes in many Aboriginal literary works; especially Jane Harrison's *Stolen* vividly portrays children's anxiety and 'indifference' towards white parents. Gladys remembers her childhood experience connected to adoption-disappointment due to the age factor:

People often came to the Home to look kids over for adoption. I don't think they realized how upsetting it could be for everyone..., we wondered who'd be the lucky one to get a Mother and a Father. This visit usually came to nothing, the kids would end up being turned down and they'd cry themselves to sleep at night..., once you'd reached the age of eight or nine, no one wanted you. (Morgan 253)

In Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1998), Anne who is adopted by a middle class white family at an early age materially enjoys a relatively comfortable existence. But later she comes to know that she is not the daughter of the white family and her parents are of Aboriginals. She yearns to meet and mingle with them. But what kind of emotional barriers must be breached down to bring the mother and child together again? Anne is introduced to her mother as a stranger. This is a kind of reversal of human relationship in the ordinary world; common normal world. The child is no longer a child but she is a grown up, she has lost all the affection of her parents during childhood. The vacuum is too wide to be filled.

Colonialism stole away land and freedom from the Aboriginal people and pushed them into utter poverty and destitution. Sally Morgan acknowledges the fact that she has to share her bed with her brother and sister or even with five of her siblings due to the scarcity of space in their home as a child. On contrary, her classmates have their separate beds or rooms. Sally reflects the days when she wants to read books at home but could not afford to buy books due to dire poverty. She admits being excited to eat chicken once a year. In such days of poverty they would dream about lottery-tickets saving them. She also acknowledges that her fatherless family is helped by benefactors but this help is received in the disguise of Indian identity and not as Aboriginals.

Similarly, Arthur recalls the poverty, hunger, and difficulty of his childhood at the mission home. He remembers a Christmas Eve where he has to force himself to eat more food because he is "not given such amount of food everyday" (180). He also says that he has to wear the "old clothes" of his owner's son (192). As a child he is obliged to perform many odd jobs unfitting for a child to feed himself after he has run away from the mission house.

My Place reveals the irony of education policies introduced for the upliftment of the Aboriginals. Though Aboriginal children are taken away from their parents in the name of education yet the schooling reduces them to mere

domestic servants, where violence and maltreatment are common and there is no opportunity for their better future. Gladys recollects that “all the Aboriginal girls were sent out as domestics once they reached fourteen years...” (270). Arthur tells that “...when girls were older, they were put into service as house girls, maids” (184). Mudrooroo offers an interesting contradictory picture of education methods at work in Australia. He says that in pre-white Australian land kids used to learn about the ways of life by being part of the elders and sharing their experiences. Whereas in post-white era “The education system in Australia is a socializing process. A kid enters it to be socialized into the dominant norms of the master society, and if he or she does not learn how to play the system, or refuses to participate, then it is too bad” (112-113).

Such a narrative of child abuse is depicted in Harrison’s play *Stolen*. Ruby, a character in the play, is an emotionally and physically abused young girl. She is forced to work as a domestic from a young age, and is driven insane by the abuse of her white masters. The owners treat her as a ‘stray dog’. Because of sexual abuse, her innocence is being crushed at such a younger age and she gradually drips into madness. Sexual harassment is perpetrated against the Aboriginal girl children during colonialism.

Sally Morgan depicts the amount of severe poverty, humiliation, domestication and hunger the Aboriginal communities face due to normative white rule. Besides these tranquilities, Sally records how Aboriginals suffer psychological trauma as they are deprived from their mothers’ attendance and care. Aboriginal mothers keep themselves so engrossed in their masters’ work that they can’t even go and quench the thirst and satisfy the hunger of their suckling children. This situation is depicted in many Aboriginal writings. Daisy, in *My Place*, laments that she is not able to attend her crying child because of the heavy work assigned by her White master. She says, “It was hard for me with her (Gladys). Sometimes, she’d be crying, crying and I couldn’t go to her. I had too much work to do” (Morgan 340). Sally Morgan

deconstructs the old notions of motherhood-childhood, which is generally assumed and portrayed in the mainstream literature, a mother who leisurely looks after her child while her child enjoys. Sally Morgan shatters the illusionary, transcendental and imaginary literary descriptions of motherhood and childhood with her literary realism and practicality of Aboriginal children's experiences. The tireless search and struggle for food, the hungry stomachs of children and the business of mothers in field and white peoples' homes are well brought out in *My Place*.

The fright of punishment may be common to all children, but when the punishment is based on the fact of one's colour or birth, the oppression on young mind is unimaginable. The way they are treated differently from their white children deeply hurts their psyche. In *My Place*, Daisy is forced to be a servant girl. She has to work the entire day. Whereas the White kids of her own age enjoy their childhood. This state of Aboriginal children, who miserably work while their counter white children joyfully play, reminds me of Elizabeth Barrett Browning who awakens her Victorian society towards the plight of the young children through her poem "The Cry of the Children". The poem goes on:

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.
.....
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free. (131-133)

Such a state of Aboriginal life offers an alternative conception to the already existent notion of childhood. Police are supposed to protect the law and

order in society. In *My Place* Arthur and his friends being frightened of the Head of the mission home, approach Midland police station as they think “police were called protectors of Aboriginal in those days...” but the police says “get back to the mission! It’s none of my business what happens to you” (Morgan186). The police are reluctant in protecting Aboriginal people; rather they act as stooges in the hands of the whites for money.

Despite all the saga of Aboriginal childhood, Sally Morgan also depicts the pleasant side of their childhood and closeness to nature. Sally Morgan just voices out *a glimpse of an ice-berg* of what it was and is to be an Aboriginal child under the barbaric white-colonialism. Her text is powerful attack on all the established power structure and institutions; school, hospital, police station, religion and so on.

Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalyst’s divide human mind into ‘id, ego, and superego’. They believe that one’s suppressed and repressive feelings are stored in unconscious mind. This repression explodes and shows great impact on human behavior. According to these theorists, nearly 75% of a person’s character is formed depending on the experience s/he encounters during one’s childhood. Stolen-generation’s psyche has been traumatically ruined by the White colonialism. They were/are worse victims of it. They have developed anti-social behavioral elements such as; criminality, addiction to drugs, sex and alcohol etc. The play *Stolen* suggests, as Jo-Ann says, that “the journey towards adulthood is tough for the stolen generation” because “by the end of the action, Ruby has gone mad and Jimmy has committed suicide in custody...” (Education)

Every literary text has a context and the context becomes political. Thus, Sally Morgan’s *My Place* is a vehement critique of the dehumanizing impact of Aboriginal Protection Acts on the Aboriginal peoples’ socio-cultural, economic-political and spiritual spheres of life. This is a text that throws in enormous light on the devastated juvenile experiences of the innocent

Aboriginals. The text is a reminiscence of broken childhood which presents a vivid picture of agony of Aboriginal children along with Aboriginals' history and culture.

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