

FROM CONCEALING TO RECLAIMING: A STUDY OF ABORIGINAL IDENTITY IN SALLY MORGAN'S *MY PLACE*

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Abstract

Concealing one's identity due to fear of shame and to avoid discrimination can be seen in the cases of marginalized community. This deliberate hiding of their communal identity for the native people was a shield of protection from racial hostility in the White society. But in social science research, it can be a serious hindrance in attaining objective view or reality. The present paper tries to analyze how the aboriginal community people initially hide their identity deliberately and how they evolve into maturation of reclaiming their identity as their own with a study of Sally Morgan's My Place and how it changes the perception about Australian Aboriginals.

Key words: Aboriginal community, fear of shame, deliberate hiding, and reclamation

In the process of colonialism and globalization many people have lost their land, culture, and identity. Native people of many countries such as Canada, America, Africa and Australia were deterritorialized from their own places and have been forcefully dislocated. In the case of Canada, and Australia, the people were segregated within the nations whereas in Africa, the people were completely displaced from their own country to a new country. This process of 'othering' the native people follows discrimination, humiliation and oppression which lead to concealing their identity. This paper aims to present how the Aboriginals, the native inhabitants of Australia, conceal their identity due to fear of shame and discrimination and how they finally evolve into maturation and claim their identity later with a study of the life narrative of Sally Morgan *My Place*, an Australian Aboriginal writer.

Australia is a land of resources. Many sources mention that the native people of Australia who are called Aboriginals live here before 45,000 to 50000 years of European colonization as separate groups throughout Australia. (Berndt and Tonkinson) Though Australia seems barren to the outside world and people, the Aboriginals have a rich culture of their own which they pass it from one generation to another generation orally. They have their own language, food habits and they are said to have spiritual and healing powers too.

The European settlement in Australia began in 1606 with a ship called *Duyfken* captained by William Janszoon. Initially, the Europeans had a good rapport with the

Aboriginals, but later the Aboriginals realized that the presence of Europeans disrupted their way of life. Gradually the Europeans colonized the country and the people. Moreover, with the advent of Europeans, many contagious diseases were brought in and the population of Aboriginal people highly reduced. The imported European flora and fauna became a serious threat to the native plants and animals of Australia.

In the early days of their settlement, the European men exploited Aboriginal women for pleasure which resulted in half- breed children. After the colonization of Australia by the British, the Aboriginals were dispossessed of their land. The half- breed children were forcibly removed from their Aboriginal parents in the name of assimilation. The motivation behind this act of British was to diminish the Aboriginal trace from Australia and transforms the country into a White one. The Whites were conscious of adopting only white children or most coloured and thus ignored the black. The adopted children were put into missionaries and homes run by European missionaries. They were removed from the Aboriginal parents with the promise that they would be provided good education and all the necessary facilities. Instead, they were all christened and they were forbidden to practice their own native culture, to speak the native language and forced to speak only in English. Thus, they wanted to remove the indigenous qualities from the children and transform them to European culture.

The history of Aboriginal Australia was predominantly silenced or falsely represented. The Aboriginals were not considered human, and survival became more difficult for them. The forceful removal of native children from their families is termed as “Stolen Generation” and it had traumatic effects in the minds of Aboriginals.

The term ‘Stolen Generation’ refers to the forceful removal of Aboriginal half- breed children from their Aboriginal parents to assimilate them into White culture. The children were taken from the parents with the hope that they would be provided good education. In this process, many Aboriginal parents have lost their children. They were placed in missionaries and in service to White people where they were abused based on their colour. Moreover, they had been prohibited from speaking their own Aboriginal language and following their own culture and were compelled to converse in English and follow European culture. Both the parents and the children had been affected by the traumatic experiences of forceful separation. This ‘silenced cruel history’ has been recovered by recent researchers and through literary works, the Aboriginals authors tried to preserve their culture. But they encounter many struggles like authenticating their written works and the interest for aboriginal culture. (“The Stolen Generation”)

Recently, there is a new interest in Aboriginal literature among Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals and this might be because of their acceptance as national citizens of Australia with the voting right in 1962, and the inclusion of Aboriginal people in Australian census in 1967. Many have lost their children due to governmental policies of assimilation. Sally Morgan, one of the well-known Australian Aboriginal writers, has published her life narrative *My Place* in 1987. Sally Morgan was born in 1951 in Perth, Western Australia. Though many

works have been published before *My Place* by Aboriginal authors, this autobiographical narrative got a privilege as it focuses on the hidden history of Aboriginals especially the “Stolen Generation”. In this autobiographical narrative, though Sally has not directly been affected by the assimilation policies, she learns it from the hard life of her mother and her grandmother. Though Sally Morgan has explored her matrilineal family heritage and her work seems like a personal narrative, the readers can learn the hardships of the Aboriginals as a whole.

My Place is a journey of a young girl named Sally Morgan from childhood to maturity during when she finds out the truth that she is an Aboriginal. Sally with her mother Gladys, grandmother Daisy alias Nan and with her siblings, dwell in Perth, Australia. Though they live in amidst of other Australians, Sally feels herself different from others. Her ‘sense of otherness’ becomes firm when she is inquired about her nationality by her fellow mates in school. Hence, Sally develops a quest for finding out who they are and why they are different from others. However, when she questions her family’s past is systematically concealed from Sally and her siblings by her mother and grandmother. Sally is also unyielding in her decision of finding out the truth.

Recent advent of feminist theorists advocate developing women’s knowledge based on women’s and other marginalized people’s experiences at the center of the research. This is famously known as feminist standpoint theory coined by American feminist philosopher Sandra Harding. Kristina Rolin, another scholar on feminist standpoint theory, in her article “Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the study of Power Relations” stated that many factors disrupt gaining objective results in social science research. Shame, Fear and Intimidation are some of the disruptors of getting objective view of social science research. This paper analyses how this fear of intimidation and shame have made the Australian Aboriginals to conceal their identity.

Often ignored and concealed by the elders of the family, Sally has an anxiety over their past and their identity and she wants to find out the truth in many ways which distressed the elders in the family. In *My Place*, Sally’s sense of home and the past occurs to her while she was studying in school, Sally Morgan felt that her behavior is completely different from other children. They were amazed when Sally explained that she shared her bed with her siblings. This is due to the socio-economic condition of the Australian Aboriginals. Their position in the Australian social order is directly connected with their socio-economic condition as they are entwined with each other.

When her fellow classmates asked her to which country she belonged. Till then, Sally thought that they were also Australians as the other children but when the children asked them about their parents’ nationality, Sally became confused and she really wanted to know whether they were Australians or not. “The kids at school had also begun asking what country we came from. This puzzled me because, up until then, I’d thought we were the same as them. If we insisted that we came from Australia, they’d reply, ‘Yeah, but what about ya

parents, but they didn't come from Australia" (38) When she enquired her mother, she told that they were Indians with which Sally was convinced as she was a child and was not aware of the structural hierarchy that prevailed in Australian society.

Till half of the narrative, Sally's identity is completely hidden from her and other siblings. Though Sally could sense that her mother's and grandmother's ways of life were different from others, she could not find out anything. Their way of treating illness, their caution about saving money, their life differ from others completely and they do not want others to see their life.

When Sally once met a dark girl, she became close with her unconsciously. This implies that Sally has innate Aboriginal nature and qualities with which she can be close with her own people but not with Whites. When that girl says she was leaving, Sally was bewildered and asked where she was leaving. She said:

I'm going to live with my people.

'Your people?' I was so dumb.

'Yes. I'm going to back live with them. I want to help them if I can.'

I was really sorry I wouldn't be seeing her anymore. And I wondered who her people were and why they needed help. What was wrong with them? I was too embarrassed to ask. (111-12)

Everything is systematically hidden from her. When once Nan's brother Arthur visited the family, Sally wondered as she never knew that her grandmother had a brother. When Arthur wished to meet Gladys' husband, she lied that he was asleep but she wondered why she lied to Arthur. But the children of Arthur had a deep impact in Sally's mind. Though she wished to know more about them, she knew for sure that her mother would not disclose anything to her.

Sally has not thought of the colour of her grandmother as black and one day when her grandmother emotionally burst out that she was black and the children ignore her because she was black.

You bloody kids don't want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black!' With that Nan pushed her chair and hurried out to her room....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, neither were we. What did that make us, what did that make me? I had never thought of myself as being black before.

Only then Sally Morgan realized the difference in colour of her grandmother. She became clear that she was an Aboriginal when her sister revealed that "we're Boongs" (121). Sally could see the sense of discomfort in Jill's face when she uttered the word 'Boong' and Sally immediately related that a social stigma was attached to Aboriginals which she has witnessed in her school. This was a crucial moment in Sally's life as she decided to find her identity at her age of fifteen. Though she wished to accept the fact that her family was of Aboriginal

heritage, Jill was not ready to accept because of the social stigma attached with Australian Aboriginals. The Aboriginals were considered bad.

‘You know, Jill’, I said after a while, ‘if we are Boongs, and I don’t know if we are not, but if we are, there’s nothing we can do about it, so we might as well just accept it’.

... ‘You know Susan?’ Jill said ... ‘Her mother said she doesn’t want her mixing with you because you’re a bad influence. She reckons all Abos are a bad influence.

... 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! (98)

The fear of discrimination and humiliation made Nan to exclude herself from others. Later Sally Morgan observed that her grandmother disappeared whenever Sally had brought her friends home. When she asked her mother Gladys about this strange behavior of her grandmother Nan, Gladys replied that it is because of her aging. But one day when Sally took her friend into the kitchen, Nan was furious and after Sally’s friend left home, Nan told her “You’re not to keep bringin’ people inside, Sally. You got no shame. We don’t want them to see how we live.” (96) This is due to her fear and shame about her family’s condition. This social stigma has forced the Aboriginals to conceal their identity from others, though they lived among the others and exclude themselves from others.

Whenever Sally tried to make things clear, both Sally’s mother and grandmother disapproved the idea and dropped it. They were not ready to disclose the truth but then and there in the narrative, the predicament of the Australian Aboriginals was stated by Nan and Gladys.

Both Gladys and Nan were scared of the government and the people in authority. Nan warns Sally to be aware of the people in authority.

Ooh, ... You don’t know what the government’s like, you’re too young. You’ll find out one day what they can do to people. You never trust anybody who works for the government, you dunno what they say about you behind your back. You mark my words, Sally. (96)

This fear of the government people made Nan not to allow Sally to apply for the scholarship given to Aboriginal students. When Sally decided to apply for the scholarship after learning the truth from her mother’s mouth that they belong to Aboriginal lineage, it was not about money but about her proclaiming their so-called disgraced identity. “It wasn’t the money I was after... I desperately wanted to do something to identify with my new-found heritage and that was the only thing I could think of.” (137) But Nan was very suspicious of this and warned Sally not to disclose anything to the government people. She still believed that the government would not take any measures to prevent the mistreatment of Aboriginal groups. But after then, she started to show some more interest on news about her people which itself is a way of reclamation. Whenever they see people like her on television, she immediately

had a sense of belonging to her groups and it was a ray of hope of their betterment. “She identified with them. In a sense, they were her people, because they shared the common bond of blackness and the oppression that, for so long, that colour had brought. It was only a small change, but it was a beginning.”(138)

This change of Nan, her liking to her people made Sally to be more determined to learn her past. She wanted to learn more about her groups. Till then, both Sally and Jill told their friends that they were Indians but now they asserted that they were Aboriginal. The change in Jill was can also be taken as a hope for learning the past.

It has been evident from the narrative that the Aboriginals were oppressed verbally. When Sally called her husband Curl a bloody mongrel in a funny way, Nan’s offended and advised her not to use the word anymore. “I been called that’, Nan replied. ‘It makes you feel real rotten inside.’”(143)Digging up the past, in another way, was not encouraged by Gladys and Nan especially was because that memory was accompanied by pain and Nan decided to bury the truth within her. But Sally decided to learn the past through the stories of Arthur, Nan’s brother.

Unlike Nan, her brother Arthur was proud to be an Australian Aboriginal. Gradually Gladys started to show some interest in the past because she wanted to know her father, grandparents. Gladys firmly replied Nan that she wanted to learn her past, her reclamation started which was another success for Sally in her mission of learning the past. “You seem to be ashamed of your past, I don’t know why. All my life, I’ve wanted a family you won’t even tell me about my own grandmother. You go away and let Arthur talk, at least he tells me something” (148)

Nan was ashamed of being black and sometimes she wished to have been born as a white. This is due to the power they possessed in the past that they could do anything. But Arthur asserted there was nothing wrong in being Black. Though Nan did not want to remember the painful memory, she loved to converse in her aboriginal language with Arthur and she remembered it after a long time which is another way of reclaiming their identity. “a language needs to be used to be remembered. It must mean it was important to her. She might turn into a proud blackfella yet.” (149) But soon after this, Nan started to share many aboriginal words to Sally. Hence Sally determined to write a book of her family history after Nan’s sharing of her aboriginal language. Gladys also approved this later as follows: “‘Why shouldn’t she write a book?’ Mum said firmly. ‘There’s been nothing written about people like us, all the history’s about the white man. There’s nothing about Aboriginal people and what they’ve been through.’” (161) Thus, more than revelation of their identity and family history, it was like creating a history of their people by their people by revealing the first hand experiences of the Aboriginals as proposed by standpoint theory. “”

Sally travelled across Australia to find her family’s past and she learnt the plight of Aboriginals. She met Aunt Judy, Nan’s employer in Corunna Downs Station and learnt that Nan’s father was Maltese Sam. Most of the records relating to the Aboriginals was not

available. The Stolen Generation needs to be mentioned here, as it refers to the forceful removal of half-Aboriginal and half-white children from their Aboriginal parents and to transform them a complete White. She then understood the treatment of the aboriginal was pathetic and it was more like the slavery system in America.

Well, when Nan was younger, Aborigines were considered sub-normal and not capable of being educated the way whites were. ... Aboriginal people were forced to work, if they didn't, the station owners called the police in. I always thought Australia was different from America, Mum, but we had slavery here, too. The people might not have been sold on the blocks like the American Negroes were, but they were owned, just the same. 151

The term 'Stolen Generation' refers to the forceful removal of half-white children from their Aboriginal parents and transforms them into complete white. The government, in fact, were to be the protectors of Aboriginals but they had severe policies to execute the forceful separation of the children from the Aboriginal parents. When Sally tried to find evidences of the past, she could not find out any and they had difficulty in accessibility too as it was controlled by the police.

There all sorts of files about Aboriginals 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 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. 163-4

By the above quote, the stolen generation was hinted by the author and this separation of the children from the parents had a deep impact in the minds of parents as well as children. Every one of them struggled in their life in different ways. Arthur, Nan's brother, was taken away to the missionary school with his half- brother Albert. As children, they did not understand why they had been taken away. The parents had been convinced that they would be given good education and they would return soon. But the Aboriginal parents were unaware that they would not meet their children anymore, and as promised they were not treated well. They were all like prisoners in a prison. They have christened the children and their Aboriginal names have been changed. The children were prohibited from following their Aboriginal culture and speaking their Aboriginal language, and they wanted to convert them completely as Whites. It was traumatic for them to be separated but the Aboriginal parents believed that their children would have good education, good life as they were promised before taking the children from them.

Many children have escaped from the place and moved to many places. Arthur also has escaped from the Stations, and wandered to many places. Whenever they sought help

from people, they were told to go to the Camps themselves because it is their 'place'. But the half-breed Aboriginal children never wanted to be assimilated, and they escaped and tried to live independently. Thus Arthur later settles in life after many struggles. The place of one's own was important those days as it is related to one's identity. When one was unaware of his place, he was unaware of his parentage and identity. When Arthur got engaged, he was worried about his parentage as he did not know his father, and he resolved this issue by telling that he was the son of Corunna from Corunna Downs Station. Hence, with colonialism, Aboriginals have lost their lands, culture, people, language and their identity too. When Arthur was good with the farm and land, a white man wanted to buy that. He later confiscated his land and horses. At the end of his story, Arthur stated:

the trouble is that colonialism is not yet over. We still have White Australia policy against the Aborigines. Aah, it's always been the same. They say there's been no difference between black and white... that's a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin', the government's been robbin' him blind for years. (Morgan 212)

Arthur also has reflected the thoughts of the Aboriginals that they want to live their life independently without being assimilated into White culture. They wanted their rights. He also felt proud to be an Aboriginal. Once Arthur's story was finished, Sally wanted to explore the past in detail for which she decided go to North, where the Aboriginals have been living for years. When she met her people in the North, they welcomed her and she and her mother Sally felt the sense of care and love along with them. They welcome them and say, "now you can come here whenever you like. We know who you belong to now. If you ever come and I'm not here... You just tell them your group and who you're related to. You got a right to be here same as the others." (Morgan 232)

When Sally and her mother met other Aboriginals, a sense of reunion was ignited in both Sally and her mother Gladys and the people. With tearful eyes, they say "You my relations! Yes, you've come to the right place. You my people." (233) Their search for place brought back their identity. When they were amidst the company of other Aboriginals, their sense of loss diminished and they recognized their true identity. They offered an old stone which was used to grind seeds to them telling that Nan might like it. "'You think Daisy might like that? She'd know what it was for, it might mean something to her.'" (230) Sally confesses that "We were different people, now. What began as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it." (233)

In the story of Sally's mother Gladys, in 1931, she was taken to Parkerville Children's Home when she was three, and from then onwards it was made her home. The children were systematically and forcibly segregated from their parents and so they became scared. Gladys, in her part of the narrative, conveyed that when she heard the Aboriginal music, she had a sense of protection. The Aboriginals had a sense of belonging to their own people, land, music, birds and animals. Moreover, they had been commanded not to talk about being

Aboriginal. Later, after her marriage with Bill, Gladys had not been accepted as equal by her in-laws due to her Aboriginal identity. Throughout her life, she was scared of being an Aboriginal and living among the Whites. In the past, she felt ashamed of being an Aboriginal and wished to have been born as White because she and Nan assumed that Whites were superior and they could do anything they wanted. The blacks were like their servants. After their visit to her native place, Sally's mother and Sally, though did not live with them directly, had a sense of place. "We kissed everyone goodbye and headed off towards Nullagine. Mum and I were both a bit teary. Nothing was said, but I knew she felt like I did. Like we'd suddenly come home and now we were leaving again. But we had a sense of place, now." (Morgan 230)

Gladys told that due to the hardships they encountered, they concealed the struggles from their children and wanted to bring them as part of White culture, which allowed them to be free from racial disparity. But she changed her attitude in the final part of her story by saying "I hope my children will feel proud of the spiritual background from which they've sprung. If we all keep saying we're proud to be Aboriginal, then maybe other Australians will see that we are a people to be proud of.... All I want my children to do is to pass their Aboriginal heritage on" (Morgan 306). Thus during the course of her Sally's mother developed an interest for her people and stated to identify herself with them.

After their visit to the Aboriginal people, Nan's behaviour had also changed slightly which is implied from her listening to their talk in wonder and disbelief. Finally, she agreed to reveal some secrets of her past life to her granddaughter. When Nan was hospitalized in a hospital where Sally's sister Helen works, she was mistreated by the White doctors. This implies that Aboriginals were still treated badly. When Nan shared her story, she revealed that it's really hard to be a black in midst of whites. They treated the blacks like beasts. Thus it was often understood from the speeches of Gladys, and Nan that though they gave space, and place to the blacks, they had not been treated properly. What she wanted was equal treatment of Aboriginals like Whites. This revelation of her past to help Sally to write the family history was reclamation of her identity.

At the end of the narrative, both Sally's mother and grandmother reclaim their identity as Aboriginals and felt proud to be of Aboriginal lineage. Thus they emerge from the phase of concealing their Aboriginal identity and proudly evolve as Aboriginals. Thus this paper presents how the Aboriginals in the chosen narrative reclaim their Aboriginal selves.

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