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Reclaiming the Silenced Past: A Postcolonial Reading of Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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Abstract— *Australia today is acknowledged as a multicultural and multiethnic democracy. However, its history of a quarter millennium ago is neither spotless nor unblemished. Numerous heterogeneous Aboriginals tribes inhabited this island region for about 40,000 years until 1788. Nonetheless, their proportion of the total population in Australia has decreased to approximately 3.8% now. The missing 96.2% of Aboriginal population needs to be accounted for. The predominant narrative, woven by white scholars with a predominant Eurocentric viewpoint, conveniently ignores such uncomfortable enquiries. It distorts Australian history and culture, glorifying the colonisers who hoisted the Union Jack on the native land in 1788. The indigenous Aboriginal tribes were portrayed as savage heathens in urgent need of reform, civilisation, culture, and religion. It was used as an alibi to displace, dispossess, subjugate and annihilate the numerous native tribes. A small number of Indigenous populations, who have successfully achieved upward social mobility assume the crucial role of advocating for their community by sharing their narrative, historical experiences, cultural heritage, the injustices they have endured and continue to face and how they envision a dignified future. In this context, the present paper is a reading of one such life-writing by an Aboriginal woman, My Place by Sally Morgan.*

Keywords— ***Indigenous life-writing, stolen generations, racism, assimilation, counter-history.***

Australia today is acknowledged as a multicultural and multiethnic democracy. It is also widely characterised as a developed and affluent nation. However, its history of a quarter millennium ago is neither spotless nor unblemished. Numerous heterogeneous Aboriginals tribes inhabited this island region for about 40,000 years until 1788. Nonetheless, their proportion of the total population in Australia has decreased to approximately 3.8% now. The missing 96.2% of Aboriginal population needs to be accounted for. The predominant narrative, woven by white scholars with a predominant Eurocentric viewpoint, conveniently ignores such uncomfortable enquiries. It distorts Australian history and culture, glorifying the colonisers who hoisted the Union Jack on the native land in 1788. The indigenous Aboriginal tribes were portrayed as savage heathens in urgent need of reform, civilisation, culture, and religion. It was used as an alibi to displace, dispossess, subjugate and annihilate the numerous native tribes.

A small number of Indigenous populations, who have successfully achieved upward social mobility assume the crucial role of advocating for their community by sharing their narrative, historical experiences, cultural heritage, the injustices they have endured and continue to face and how they envision a dignified future. In this context, the present paper is a reading of one such life-writing by an Aboriginal woman.

My Place by Sally Morgan is one of the most celebrated autobiographies by an Aboriginal woman. This work stands testimony to the ordeal of three generations and contains stories of Sally Morgan's mother, grandmother and granduncle, besides herself. Morgan says in the course of the work that her aim is to put on record the Aboriginal perspective so often missing from the dominant narrative and culture, imposed from above. Sally Morgan was raised by her mother and grandmother and lived under the impression that she was a white and of Indian origin, though

since childhood she had some vague ideas and hints about her family's past. She resolves to discover her roots despite stiff resistance from her grandmother, and travels to her ancestors' land. The journey turns out to be an emotional and spiritual pilgrimage as she does manage to find out her family's antecedents, besides their culture, relatives and the humiliation and exploitation to which her grandmother was subjected. It is a poignant search for truth and roots which she ultimately discovers, and this does have a healing effect on Morgan, her mother and grandmother, as later they agree to share major portions of their past life which they had hitherto buried under shame infused silence.

Being blessed with the fruit of education and the physical and emotional presence of her grandmother and mother, Sally Morgan takes upon herself the onerous and very crucial task of setting the record straight by correcting the distorted history and setting the terms of engagement for future reconciliation. It is done through rupturing various myths notoriously built around Aboriginals and Aboriginality with an intention to set the foundations of cremating a proud heritage of sustainable living.

The first and foremost of such myths is the myth of peaceful settlement especially in the context of British settlement in Australia. The official history maintains that the founding fathers of the British penal settlement found the land desert and uninhabited or at the most inhabited by a few nomadic tribes always on the move without any settled laws, customs or real ownership of the land. The Aboriginals, after they got English education, which was in fact imposed on them, very strongly contest such false myths fabricated by the settlers.

Another associated myth, based on which the colonizers attempted to legitimize their appropriation of foreign land, is the myth of civilizing the barbarous heathens of the third-world nations, a privilege bestowed upon them by none other than Almighty himself. However, in the name of civilizing, the colonizers brutalized, enslaved, subjugated and exploited the natives. The full-blood Aboriginals, especially those who put up retaliation, were exterminated brutally and the children produced from forcefully violated Aboriginal women, the 'half-castes' were snatched away from their mothers and put in state-run homes with the intention of producing 'hands' for farms and servants for white households.

Carmel Bird exposes the real motive of the colonial government behind institutionalizing the native children:

> By seizing children of mixed descent, institutionalizing them, teaching them to despise their Aboriginal inheritance and sending them out to work as station hands or domestic servants, authorities wanted to sever the cultural connection between the children of mixed descent and their aboriginal families and communities and to prepare them for a place in the lower strata of European society. (144)

Sally Morgan, in her autobiography, reveals that her mother, grandmother and her granduncle, all belonged to the stolen generations, stolen under the false promise of education and civilizing, but left brutalized and shattered. As Bourke and Edwards also observe,

> These people have been institutionalized, fostered or adopted, loved, hated or ignored. They all share the mental torment of not belonging in the society into which European Australia had decided to put them. Australian society accepted the young Aboriginal children into its institutions but rejected them when they became adults. (102)

Sally Morgan recounts the pain of her grandmother, Nan, who was taken away from her mother on the promise of educating her like white people so that she could become somebody real important. Nan bemoans, "Why did they tell my mother that lie? Why do white people tell so many lies? I got nothin' out of their promise. My mother wouldn't have let me go just to work. She thought I was coming back" (324). From day one, Nan was employed in domestic chores and never sent to school.

The gap between myth and reality was indeed great. Nan was made to work like a machine from dawn to dusk, "The cleaning, the washing, the ironing. There wasn't nothing I didn't do. From when I got up in the morning till when I went to sleep at night, I worked … they'd throw everything down from the balcony onto the grass. I'd collect it up, take it to the laundry and wash it" (326). If this disclosure was not agonizing enough, we are disgusted to learn that this household was that of Nan's own biological but white father, Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman. He had two white wives and white children of his own, even then, he seduced the two wives of Nan's Aboriginal father. Nan and her brother, Arthur, were progenies of that forced union.

As a result, Nan was a servant in her own father's household and a nurse- maid to her white brothers and sisters. Howden had no sense of guilt or shame or any qualms about what was done to Nan as he never acknowledged her as his child because she was born out of an Aboriginal woman's womb. Violation of Aboriginal girls by the whites was treated lightly by the authorities. Aboriginal girls were considered nothing more than defenseless prey, who could be picked up and mauled any

time. As Germaine Greer in her work, *On Rage*, reports the casual attitude of the whites towards the exploitation of native girls, while narrating a particular incident, "Rape? Who said rape, Ted? Only you. What was probably said was that [the station owner] knew that his white station hands were having sexual relations with some Aboriginal girls. Nothing more. And that happens all the time. You know that… I don't call having a bit of nookie with an Aboriginal girl rape, Ted" (49).

Describing the injustice done to the mixed-bloods, Arthur, Nan's brother, rightly says, "No white man wanted to have black kids runnin' around the place with his name" (156). The same injustice was foisted upon Nan again when she grew up as young girl because her white seducer, Jack Grime, never married her because of her colour, though she bore him a girl child, Glad, whom Nan ultimately brought up alone later. Initially, Glad too was taken away or stolen by the government and shifted to Parkerville Children's Home, an orphanage run by the Church of England sisters.

This bestiality and shameless exploitation of Aboriginal women and girl children at the hands of the white Europeans is contrasted with the sense of respect, care and responsibility with which the Aboriginal young men treated women as Arthur, a young and handsome lad says, "When I was young, I had girls runnin' after me all the time… Trouble is, I was like my old grandfather, tender–hearted. I wouldn't go with any girl, because if I got her into trouble, I'd have to marry her" (203).

Arthur narrates a scene from his early life which forces us to think as to who were in the dire need of getting civilized – the natives or the colonizers. Recounting a particular incident of the treatment of the natives at the hands of the whites, Arthur says, "I remember seein' native people all chained up around the neck and hands, walkin' behind a policeman… I used to think, what have they done to be treated like that. Made me want to cry, just watchin'. Sometimes, we'd hear about white men goin' shooting black fellas for sport, just like we was some kind of animal" (179).

Morgan herself discovers from a public library about the status of indigenes when her grandmother was a young girl. Shocked and numb, she informs her mother,

> Well, when Nan was younger, Aborigines were considered sub-normal and not capable of being educated the way whites were. You know the pastoral industry was built on the back of slave labour… I always thought Australia was different to 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. (149)

Exposing the myth of equality and assimilation, Morgan reveals that she learnt from her grandmother that the whites called her and the other children "bloody mongrels" (141). She forbade Sally Morgan from calling anyone by that name, "It's not right, they got feelings… Promise me you won't ever call them that? When you see a little bloke like that, think of your Nanna" (142).

Another prevalent myth contested and busted is that of the successful assimilation of the Aboriginals in the dominant white culture. The truth being, that the Aboriginals are still on the fringes of Australian society, everyday facing racial bias, discrimination and inequality. As a result, "Feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and helplessness of life empty of meaning and purpose resulted in widespread apathy among the Aboriginal population. All too often escape into alcoholic oblivion became a panacea for the psychological pain experienced by vast number of Aboriginal people. It remains so for many to this day" (Burden 196).

Sally Morgan in her autobiography says that her grandmother and mother were extremely distrustful of the government all their life because of past experiences of racial bias and having been stolen by the authorities. She says, to run the Aboriginals down, they are referred to as "Boong" (98), as a great deal of social stigma is attached to it. Parents of white children dissuade them from making friends with the Aboriginals. An intelligent girl with good presence of mind, Morgan realizes the reason for her granny always giving royal treatment to the rent man. Nan feared being evicted owing to the whimsical, egoist and biased attitude of the whites towards people like her. She says, "In this world, there's no justice, people like us'd all be dead and gone now if it was up to this country" (105). The white people never expected the Aboriginals to be intelligent at studies. Morgan's university Professors doubted her Aboriginal credentials as she did well in her studies and even won a fellowship.

The birth, death and parentage records of the Aboriginals were never maintained. They were not included in the census up till 1967. Glad, Morgan's mother, a 55-year-old woman, had no knowledge of her father. When Morgan applies for her birth certificate, the column for the name of her mother's father remains blank, "'Just a blank? ' Mum muttered slowly. 'Just a blank. That's awful, like nobody owns me'" (150). There is utter confusion about Arthur and Nan's parentage as well. Aunt Judy claims Maltese Sam to be the father of Nan whereas it turns out to be Alfred Howden Drake-Brockman.

Arthur, Sally Morgan's granduncle, rightly says that no matter what a bloke may do for his nation, his contribution, intention, patriotism and dignity are seldom acknowledged, rather always doubted. He refers to many blacks who participated in the war on Australia's behalf, but their lot did not change much after their return because they were Aboriginals. Arthur tries to put things in perspective and says, "You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn't over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines… They say there's been no difference between black and white, we all Australians. That's a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin', the government been robbin' him blind for years" (209).

Another myth employed to justify the colonizing mission was that of Christianizing the natives, who were described by the colonizers as wandering rogues without any sense of gratitude to the Almighty. These colonizers had no inkling of the deep embedded spirituality which connected the Aboriginals to nature. Carmel Bird, who himself was forcibly taken away from his family, describes the religion-bashing practiced at orphanages, quoting a few lines from Carol's Story. He says,

> 6.30 a.m. every morning, straight from bed, we had to kneel and say our morning prayers. 7 a.m. we had to go to church for mass. If we didn't we would be punished, like going without a piece of bread for breakfast or get the strap or whipped on our palms. 7.30 a.m. we had to thank god before and after our breakfast. 10 a.m. we had to say another prayer before we had our cups of milk and morning tea break. 11 a.m. we had Catechism taught to us which was part of praying and learning… 12 p.m. again we said our prayers before and after our lunch. 1 p.m. we said another prayer before and after class. 5 p.m. we prayed again before and after our supper. 6 p.m. most times we had to go to church for Benediction or rosary. 7 p.m. we would kneel and say the last prayer of the day, which were our night prayers. (66)

The Commandment in The Bible, 'Though shall not Steal' was in fact inverted by the whites themselves and they stole the land, resources, women and children. They did not treat the natives as fellow brothers and sisters, as the scriptures espouse. They did not practice even basic humanity. They forced religion mechanically on little children several times a day including on rare picnics. The State and the Church never bothered about the credentials of caretakers, managers and doctors sent to the Aboriginal orphanages and reserves. In fact, the harsher they were the better they were considered. Severe punishments and penalties were imposed for trivial faults.

As a result, when Aboriginal children were physically and sexually abused, they could not express what happened to them. Moreover, they had no one to confide in or complain to. In some rare cases, if an Aboriginal child mustered courage enough to reveal the barbarity to the mission-sisters (in some instances they themselves were the perpetrators), they blamed the child himself or herself and segregated, confined and labeled him / her as a bad example for others. These people of God conveniently ignored the horrific sexual exploitation of the Aboriginal children at the hands of the whites, including pastors. On the contrary, the Aboriginal law and Aboriginal people in the pre-contact era did not spare their own for deviations like adultery or even dereliction of duty. Howard Groome recounts the experience of a removed Aboriginal child,

> I never told anyone for years and years. And I've had this inside me for years and years and years. I've been sexually abused, harassed, and then finally raped, y'know, and I've never had any one to talk to about it… nobody, no father, no mother, no-one. We had no-one to guide us, I felt so isolated, alienated. And I just had no-one. That's why I hit the booze. None of that family bonding, nurturing – nothing. We had nothing. (175-6)

Sally Morgan says that she always felt uncomfortable in a Church as "it was so formal and lacking in spontaneity" (102) whereas true religion can never crush the natural self and induce artificiality. She recounts her experience as a young girl when a Church minister asked her to stop mixing with his daughter. On being asked the reason, pat came the response, "I think you know why" (103). On the other hand, the Aboriginals practiced Godliness in letter and spirit even in the most adverse and trying circumstances. Sally's grandmother Nan's brother Arthur says about his white biological father, "Howden never gave me nothin'. I've only got one good father and he's in heaven. No matter which way the wind's blowin' he's there with you" (203).

Another myth, which the European colonizers proudly proclaimed was about their own superiority – racial, cultural and linguistic. English language was deliberately imposed on the natives to destroy their own language, as language is one of the key assets and means to connect with the culture and heritage of one's ancestors. In contrast to one

English language of the Europeans, the Aboriginals had more than 250 languages with further dialects in the pre-invasion era, which slowly started dying out as the stolen children lost their language. Losing the language also meant they lost their culture and were confused about their identity. Whether these children were in government run 'homes' or in the white families, whom they served, they were told to hate their culture as it was inferior. They were told lies about their parents, that they were alcoholic, illiterate and irresponsible, and so the State had removed them from their families.

Colin Tatz contests the European notion of civilization which is usually employed as a touchstone for the rest of humanity, and says,

> Civilization means neither clothes, nor houses, nor industries, nor science, nor culture, nor taste, nor literature, nor art… they stand outside the essential idea of civilization: they belong to it "materially", not "formally" (intrinsically). A primitive people needing no clothes and no houses, eating the things which nature provides for them, without literature or art or industries, would possess a perfect civilization, provided they agreed to live at peace with each other and induce consideration for each other's rights and liberties. (89)

The Aboriginals were spiritual in their outlook who had reverence for nature, for land, and who loved and respected all humanity. They were hard-working people and considerate to the needs of the poor and the unfortunate. The truth was that it was the colonizers who were uncivilized and barbarians for they uprooted and destroyed families, killed recklessly and had the audacity to justify the acts. On the contrary, the Aboriginals did not even remove animals from their mothers, and they reaped the gifts of nature in proportion to their needs. The colonizers, on the other hand, exploited women, men and children, besides plundering, looting and hoarding precious natural wealth. The Aboriginals were more civilized and humane as they lived with extended families unlike the colonizers who lived in nuclear clusters. While the colonizers lived in luxury, they rendered the Aboriginal children malnourished, with only rationed bread, flour, sugar and tea, etc. given to them, whereas in their natural habitat they lived a healthy life.

The Aboriginals had their own unique and rich culture, they were in tune with nature and worshipped their land as sacred; they possessed knowledge of rare-medicinal herbs, had rich spiritual life and were daring and adventurous. However, with the advent of the colonizers, they were displaced, dispossessed, subjugated, enslaved, butchered, exploited and their movement was restricted. In short, the settlers hoisted the ills of the modern western imperialistic civilization on this pristine land too. These proud, dignified people were reduced to a miserable life. Jenny Burden describes as to what was done to the Aboriginals:

> Dispossessed from their land, the dispirited and disoriented remnants of broken tribes were forced into unfamiliar and often alien territory. Many were relocated on missions and reserves where traditional ceremonies and language were forbidden. Some lived as fringe dwellers on the outskirts of European towns… or worked on sheep and cattle stations in order to remain close to their own country. Most Aboriginal people lived in squalid conditions. (195)

Sally Morgan too values the real-life practical education which the Aboriginal lifestyle naturally imparted. From her grandmother she learnt to observe and revere nature and respect all mankind. The education that she was imparted in school she found irrelevant. "Apart from learning different ways to feign illness, there wasn't much to school that year. All my lessons seemed unrelated to life. I often wondered how my teachers could be so interested in the sums I got wrong and so disinterested… whether dad was home from hospital or not" (39).

It were the Aboriginals who were a truly superior race and civilization as they had deep and genuine respect for nature, humanity, women, spirituality, tradition and language. They practised what they preached. Therefore, to call them uncivilized cannot be just naive ignorance but European cultural chauvinism and a deep-rooted conspiracy to destroy and appropriate their land and wealth for expanding the colonial citadel. What they implemented in Australia was the imperialist and capitalist models of exploitation.

Morgan's mother, Glad, was forcefully moved to Parkerville Children's Home at the age of three and she recounts what the whites did to infants like her and how she desperately yearned for the lap of her mother:

> If no one came, you put on a brave face and didn't cry…. if one of your friends got visitors, you'd be so jealous… It was hardest for the Aboriginal kids. We didn't have anyone. Some of the kids there had been taken from families that

> lived hundreds of miles away… And anyway, Aboriginal people had to get permits to travel. Sometimes they wouldn't give them a permit. They didn't care that they wanted to see their kids. (246)

It shows utter heartlessness, callousness and refusal to acknowledge blacks as humans, on the part of the European colonizers.

The myth of a superior civilization of the whites stands starkly exposed when Sally Morgan narrates the incident when the trainee doctors in a hospital stripped Morgan's granny naked to conduct some tests to gain some extra marks. Nan rightly says that they chose her because she was black and she could bet they didn't do that to white people.

Another prevalent myth circulated by the settlers was that of benign effect of colonization and it stands exposed as the percentage of Aboriginal population was reduced to just 3.8% of the total population of the country. The colonial policies of depriving the Aboriginals of their culture, their land and their family pushed many adult Aboriginals into alcoholism and other forms of self-destruction. Jenny Burden describes the condition of the indigenes: "The once vibrant hunter-gatherer societies were reduced to little more than collections of sick, impoverished and undernourished mendicants forced to eke out an existence on the fringes of European settlement, cut off from their country, their sacred sites and their religion. The essence of their life had been taken from them" (195). The civilizing mission at the most can be termed superficial as what they taught was wearing western/urban clothes, taking daily showers, etc., whereas the Aboriginals were more civilized, religious and spiritual deep inside.

Sally Morgan says that to escape the harsh reality, her mother lived under illusions and deliberately saw the funny sides of things. Her father, a prisoner of war and mentally deranged, sought refuge in alcohol. She says, "Just a frame, that was dad. The heart had gone out of him years ago… I found it hard to comprehend that you could have so many parts missing and still alive" (16). When people like her father woke up at odd hours with a loud shriek, with memories of being captured in dirt with a rifle butt in the mouth, fresh, the nurse tried to calm them down saying it was "Only a dream" (43).

Burden enunciates that for good psychological health, one needs "a firm sense of individual identity and group belonging; a sense of security, purpose, personal involvement, satisfaction and achievement; the knowledge and skills to allow an individual to function effectively in society; the freedom to make choices of benefit to self and others, as well as a sense of control over important aspects of one's life" (189). Sadly, Billy, Morgan's father, had none of these, so he committed suicide later.

The myths of European cultural superiority and the benign effect of colonization are so engrained in the white psyche that it has been extended beyond humans to inanimate objects like toys too. Morgan's mother, Glady, remembers her white foster sister June's white doll with golden hair and blue eyes and dressed in satin and lace. For Glady, June's mother brought a black doll dressed like a servant with an apron on, resembling Glady's mother. "I stared at this doll for a minute. I was completely stunned. That's me, I thought. I wanted to be a princess, not a servant… 'I don't want a black doll.' Alice just laughed and said to my mother, 'Fancy, her not wanting a black doll'" (257).

Glady says that white children like June had their own separate rooms stuffed with soft toys and dolls whereas in orphanage cupboards dirty, broken dolls were kept, and the little girls were not allowed to take one to bed. In these mission schools, Aboriginal children had to face constant discrimination as Howard Groome reports:

> Those children who were allowed to attend their local states schools were usually segregated from other students. They had separate areas for play and in the classroom usually sat together in a black kids section at the back or on the "dark side" of the room. These conditions were still being reported in some Australian schools in the 1970s. In addition to the segregation, they frequently suffered harassment from white peers and discrimination from teachers. (174)

Nan could never openly and proudly acknowledge her Aboriginal descent. She herself was the victim of the brutal racial bias the natives were subjected to. To shield her children from the prejudice, she lied to them that they were Indians. Glad quotes Nan saying, "Terrible things will happen to you if you tell people what you are" (274). Nan also lamented that she was stuck in the middle all her life. "Too black for the whites and too white for the blacks" (328). She recalls that she was helpless and hopeless like other Aboriginals. She could see her daughter, Glady, desperately wanted to be with her, but she could do nothing, "I knew she didn't want to stay there, but what could I do? It wasn't like I had a place of my own. It wasn't like I had any say over my own life" (333). She further says out of her personal experience that money gets the better of people and they forget humanity, "Haa, that's how you get treated by rich

people, real rotten. I think they get greedy, they live for the money" (335).

The natives and their children were used as cheap labor and forced to work like machines without wages from dawn to dusk. Nan says that the big house on Corunna was built by the natives. They all worked together, building this and building that. If it wasn't for the natives, nothing would have got done. They made the station, Drake Brockmans didn't do it on their own. Even then, Aboriginals were mercilessly flogged. They had blood everywhere and would scream, "No more, No more. No more, master! He liked you to call him master" (183).

Life Writings such as *My Place* reveal that though once defeated, dispossessed, enslaved, subjugated, oppressed, raped, exploited and humiliated, the Aboriginals did not part with humanity, kinship, sharing, spirituality, and hence Godliness. These narratives also provide rare glimpses into the rich and wonderful culture of the Aboriginals about which, in the absence of such writing, the world would have known nothing.

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