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AN INTROSPECTION INTO THE SOCIETAL DILEMMA OF ABORIGINES THROUGH
SALLY MORGAN'S *MY PLACE*

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ABSTRACT

Owing to colonization of indigenous lands by wave of explorers and settlers, Aborigines around the world have faced years of violence and oppression, perpetrated by the non-indigenous settlers. The case of Australian Aborigines were no different. In fact, Australian Aborigines majorly experienced identity crisis and societal dilemma owing to discrimination faced in the society by the white skinned non-indigenous Australians. Therefore in order to deliberately intermingle with the mainstream society dominated by the European 'civilised' settlers and hence often hide their original identity by stating themselves as Indian or Italian instead of Aborigines to avoid societal stigma and isolation. The societal dilemma and hardships experienced by the Aborigines has been depicted thoroughly by Sally Morgan in her autobiography– 'My Place', comprising of the protagonist's quest for uncovering her family's past and her realization that she has grown up in false pretense. This article serves in uncovering the experiences of the Aborigines through the eyes and expression of Sally Morgan, critically reviewing their ordeal.

Key Words: Aborigines, Australia, Societal Dilemma, Identity Crisis, Sally Morgan, My Place

Introduction

My Place, written by Sally Morgan begins with the experiences of Sally's own life and her growing and adolescence years in the suburban Perth, Australia,in the 1950s and 60s. Gradually, vague hints and echoes begin to emerge, thereby providing hints about the past life of Sally and unraveling a fascinating story at a later stage in the book in which her whole family is drawn(Morgan, 1987;Renes, 2010),in an autobiography of the author that was published in 1987. The story revolves around the protagonist's quest for uncovering her family's past and her realization that she has grown up in false pretense. The autobiography is considered as a significant

Australian aboriginal literature,emphasizing that the Australian history never paid their due acknowledgement to the aborigines living in the country. Through the book the author makes the very initial literary attempt to initiate the non-Aboriginal readers about the hidden indigenous history of the country(Sonoda, 2009a).

Discussion

Societal concerns through characters and instances in *My Place*- a critical reflection

The central theme of *My Place* is the identity crisis of Aborigines in Australia and their deliberate attempt to intermingle with the mainstream society dominated by the white skinned native Australians. Through the autobiography, Morgan shows how

different characters take their turn to hide their original identity by stating themselves as Indian or Italian instead of Aborigines to avoid societal stigma and isolation. In this context, the critical analysis of the book by Aldea (2007) mainly focus upon the societal stigma of the aborigines of Australia in the 19th and 20th century revealed in their purposeful concealment of their original identity as Aborigines., Morgan portrays the harsh living conditions of the Aborigines in the past and in the present in *My Place* (Aldea, 2007). Through the book, it is shown how Aboriginal women in colonized Australia were sexually abused. They lived with the constant fear that society will isolate them due to their Aboriginal origin. They also remained scared that in case they married white Australians, their cross-breed children would be taken to camps. . The scholar further indicates towards the ironic references used in the book that reveal the inconsistency of the whites regarding the stereotypes that are attributed to the dark skinned Aborigines and the natural tendency of the Aborigines to hide their original identity as their identity was dwindled in Australia during 19th and 20th century due to white supremacy. Thus, to show this the scholar specifically picks a line where Sally says, "*They [whites] told my mother [Nan's] I was goin' to get educated [...]. Why did they tell my mother that lie? Why do white people tell so many lies? I got nothin' out of their promises*(Aldea 2007; cited from Morgan, 2000: 332). Through lines like these, Aldea explains about the hypocrisy of the whites and their attempt to deny the Aborigines their true identity by removing cross-breed children like Sally from their own parents and bringing them up in camps. Similarly, the identity crisis of the Aborigines in Australia and their attempt to get accepted in the mainstream society through intentional concealment of their true identity are revealed when in an attempt to retrospect her past Sally remarks in the book, instances like, "*I think one of the reasons I survived was because I learnt to lie so well.... We learnt it was better not to tell the truth, it only led to more trouble*"(Aldea 2007; cited from Morgan 2000: 264), .Social stigma of Sally's sister regarding her identity as Aboriginal is further revealed when she says to Sally:*You can be Indian, Dutch, Italian, anything, but not Aboriginal!*" (Aldea

2007; cited from Morgan 2000:98) While making critical appreciation of *My Place*, Renes (2010) gives focused attention towards the author's attempt to establish an amalgam of identity between essentialism and performance in her inscription of race, class, gender and genre which has not been done by Aldea in her critique of *My Place*. The scholar specifically points here that through the book, Morgan expressed societal stigma existant against the Aborigines in Australia with cleverly glossed messages that would appeal to the mainstream readers by suggesting that she had a suffered past due to the negative impact of colonialism which does not affect her in present. These are clearly revealed in lines where Sally's grandmother says "*How could I tell her it was me, and her and Nan ... The feeling that a vital part of me was missing and that I'd never belong anywhere*" (Renes 2010; cited from Morgan 1987; 106). Similarly, through lines such as "*I feel embarrassed now, to think that, once, I wanted to be white*" (Renes 2010; cited from Morgan 1987; 305), uttered by Sally the identity crisis of Aborigines in Australia is revealed simultaneous with Sally's deliberate attempt to avoid her grandmother's bitterness regarding the issue, her optimism about cultural belonging and her simultaneous endeavor to gloss over the issue of white responsibility for the Aboriginal plight.

However, while critiquing *My Place*, Windschuttle (2003) suggests that there is no hypocrisy among aborigines in connecting themselves with whites instead of their aboriginal background. The scholar points out that there is no aboriginality in the Corrunga family at all where Sally belongs, for instance, the hair of Sally does not match with the aesthetic features of aborigines. Therefore, there is no evidence in the novel that Sally has a native past except for the stories she hears from her family. Rather, as she is readily accepted by the white Australians and there is no force from the whites to make people like her become a part of them by forgetting their ethnic history. So, it is her thankfulness to the community that is depicted in the form of her attempt to introduce herself as white Australian. Sonoda (2009b) agrees with the commentary by presenting

similar critical view on the notion of identity expressed in Sally Morgan's *My Place* by discussing it on a positive light. According to the scholar, through the book it is revealed that naming oneself as Aboriginal is not the only criteria for establishing one's identity in the post-national period. Rather, confirmation of others is essential for the purpose. Hence, in spite of knowing that she is an aboriginal, Sally had little knowledge of her native past because whatever she knows developed from the stories she heard from her family members. On the other hand, her personal interaction with the white Australians and greater knowledge about the history of the whites makes her identify herself more with them. Therefore, the scholar justifies that is no pretence in aboriginals like Sally when they identify themselves as white Australians instead of their aboriginal background.

Conclusion

In Australia, attempt was taken to safeguard the life and interests of Aboriginals in Australia and include them in the mainstream society during the 19th and 20th century. However, this remained as a hypothetical notion and created gap between the whites and the Aborigines in reality characterized by white supremacy over the dark skinned Australians and denigration of their lifestyles (Muller, 2011). The reading of *My Place* by Sally Morgan also suggests brings forth the same scenario by showing that the native Australians were not intolerant about the existence of the Aborigines, their attempt to culturally assimilate them with the mainstream society manifested in the form of abuse and torture. However, while some critical reading of the book also suggests how the Aborigines also became tolerant about this white supremacy and deliberately concealed their real identity with the hope that by doing so they will be able to overcome this ethnic discrimination and become a part of the mainstream society, few others indicate that there is no hypocrisy in the aboriginals in not introducing themselves as per their ethnic background. Rather, these aboriginals know so little about their native past and the whites have accepted them so well in their society that the aboriginals identify themselves more with these white Australians.

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