

Original Article

FROM VOICELESSNESS TO VOCAL AGENCY: A SUBALTERN RECLAMATION OF IDENTITY AND VOICE IN SALLY MORGAN'S MY PLACE

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ABSTRACT

People are deeply influenced by the worlds they grow up in and the values they inherit. For Australian Aboriginal people, the journey to understand their identity and cultural roots is especially complex. This paper delves into Sally Morgan's *My Place*, highlighting how reclaiming ancestral stories helps rebuild Aboriginal identity. It also uncovers the pain, prejudice, and obstacles Indigenous Australians face as they fight to keep their culture alive and regain their rightful place in society. Through Morgan's storytelling, reconnecting with the past becomes a powerful tool to challenge silence and stereotypes about Aboriginal people. *My Place* is more than a personal memoir; it becomes a chorus for those silenced, showing how sharing family memories can push back against oppression and celebrate cultural pride. In this way, *My Place* stands as a symbol of the wider Aboriginal quest for recognition, belonging, and the survival of their heritage.

Keywords: Aboriginal Identity, Agency, Australian Literature, Indigenous Voice, *My Place*, Sally Morgan, Subalternity, Voice and Voicelessness

INTRODUCTION

Sally Morgan, a celebrated Australian Aboriginal author, leads the Centre for Western Indigenous History and the Arts at the University of Western Australia. Her achievements include the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's humanitarian award, the Australia Week literary award for non-fiction, and the Order of Australia Book Prize. In her autobiography *My Place*, Morgan embarks on a heartfelt exploration of her family's history and cultural identity. Much of the book is devoted to unraveling her family's roots, while the rest follows her determined quest to map out their journeys across landscapes, generations, and inner worlds.

John Calmer, in his book *Australian Autobiography: The Personal Quest*, discusses the nature of Australian autobiographies. He asserts that Morgan's autobiography represents the voice of the neglected or misunderstood outsider. *My Place* is an autobiographical work that incorporates transcribed oral narratives from Morgan's grandmother Daisy, her mother Gladys, and her great uncle Arthur Corunna. The narrative begins with Morgan's childhood experiences, during which she and her siblings lived with both parents until their father's death. Despite her father being white, Morgan experiences a sense of displacement from an early age. In the opening chapter, her visit to her father in the hospital highlights her feelings of alienation within a predominantly white environment, establishing the context for her exploration of social and cultural displacement and her Aboriginal heritage. She writes:

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The hospital again, and the echo of my reluctant feet through the long empty corridors, I hated hospitals and hospital smells. I hated the bare books that gleamed with newly applied polish, the dust-free window-sills, and the flashes of shiny chrome that snatched my distorted shape as we hurried past. I was a grubby five-year-old in an alien environment. (Morgan 11)

From Voicelessness to Vocal Agency: A Subaltern Reclamation of Identity and Voice in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

Our upbringing, the world around us, and the values, traditions, and beliefs we inherit all leave deep marks on who we become. Identity often grows from memories of home, family stories, and cultural roots. For Australian Aboriginal people, the path to understanding and reclaiming identity has been especially challenging, shaped by colonisation, discrimination, displacement, and the painful loss of cultural connections. The search for roots becomes both a personal quest and a shared mission to recover a history that has too often been pushed aside, distorted, or purposefully silenced.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* brings this struggle to life as she delves into her family's past and gradually uncovers her Aboriginal heritage. Each hidden story she reveals offers a new piece of her identity, while the memories of her mother and grandmother become guiding lights, helping her reconnect with a once-hidden world. Morgan's journey shows how understanding where we come from can deepen our sense of belonging and self-awareness. Her family's experiences of discrimination, fear, and the need to hide their Aboriginal identity reveal how colonial attitudes left scars not just on individuals, but on entire families and generations. The silence that surrounded Aboriginal identity was often a shield against trauma and prejudice. By choosing to share these stories, Morgan performs a powerful act of remembrance and reclamation.

In *My Place*, Morgan lifts up voices and stories that have long been left out of mainstream Australian history. Through her family's experiences, she challenges stereotypes and expands the narrow ways Aboriginal people have been portrayed. Her work reveals the richness of Indigenous histories, memories, cultures, and the deep bonds to land and community. By sharing these lived experiences, Morgan invites readers to step inside Aboriginal identity, seeing it through the eyes of those who live it rather than through the lens of the dominant culture.

Within this context, *My Place* transforms from a personal memoir into a powerful expression of cultural memory and identity. Morgan's storytelling demonstrates how remembering the past can break through silence and help restore cultural pride. Her search for family history is woven into the broader Aboriginal fight for recognition, dignity, and a sense of belonging. By recovering what was lost, she not only embraces her own hidden identity but also creates space for Aboriginal voices to be heard and honored.

In the end, *My Place* shines a light on how family, memory, culture, and place shape who we are. Morgan's journey reveals that knowing our past is essential for understanding the present and dreaming of a fairer future. By sharing her family's stories, she brings to the surface both the pain and the strength of Indigenous Australians, breaking the silence that has long surrounded their experiences. Her work stands as both a personal quest for identity and a powerful call for Aboriginal people to preserve their culture, reclaim their history, and find their rightful place in Australian society.

In her school, she has been treated differently by her teachers and friends. The children at the school think that she is not of Australian origin. Sally writes about this experience as:

The kids at school had also began asking us 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 your parents, but they didn't come from Australia'. (38)

As a child, Morgan does not grasp the importance of her family's skin colour, yet she is marked as an outsider because of it. Innes, writing in *The Cambridge Dictionary to Postcolonial Literature in English*, explores Morgan's sense of not belonging, observing that urban Australia is seen as a space for white people, while black people are pushed to the margins. This perception deepens Morgan's feelings of alienation. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin expand on these postcolonial ideas, focusing on how colour and race shape identity and exclusion:

They emphasized the visibility of signs of difference when manifested in skin colour, hair type, facial features such as eye shape or nose shape, etc. Although such differences 'do not constitute any decisive genetic dissimilarity, and certainly do not indicate the existence of sub-groups within a single human species [...] they nevertheless became prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific groups. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 183-184)

Morgan learns of her Aboriginal heritage from her sister, yet she senses something unusual about her family. This perception is reinforced by a classmate's remark: "You've got the most abnormal family, I've ever come across. Don't get me wrong. I like your mother. I really do, but the way you look at life is weird" (107). Morgan is confused by others' perceptions of her family. Upon discovering her Aboriginal heritage, she feels excited, viewing it as the beginning of understanding her roots. She states, "Before we have nothing. At least now, we've got a beginning" (136). However, she remains uncertain about what it means to be Aboriginal and seeks answers to her questions: "What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in Corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life Suburbia and told everyone, I was an Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?" (141).

She starts searching her roots and finds out her family's history which is the part of the history of the Aboriginal people. She understands the feelings of her grandmother Daisy, while speaking to her. She writes: "You bloody kids don't want me, you want a bloody white grandmother. I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black! [...] for the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan's colouring. She was right, she was right, she wasn't white" (97). Her quest to search about her past leads her to reconstruct her identity. Said also supports the view of Sally in giving importance to past in his *Overlapping Territories Intertwined Histories* as:

Even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other, [...] each co-exists with the other [...] Neither past nor present [...] has complete meaning alone. (Said 2)

To uncover her family's history, Morgan begins by questioning her Morgan's search for her family's past begins with heartfelt conversations with her grandmother, mother, and great uncle. She turns to the Battye Library, eager to fill the gaps in Aboriginal history. Driven by the need to preserve her family's story, she chooses to write a book, convinced that these personal histories are vital for understanding the Aboriginal experience. By capturing her family's memories, Morgan weaves their voices into the larger tapestry of Australia's history. The life stories of her mother, grandmother, and great uncle shine a light on chapters of Aboriginal history that have long been hidden from view. In a conversation with her great uncle, she reveals:

The old police files, they're not even controlled by Battye library, they're controlled by the police. And they don't like There's a lot of history we can't get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed were supposed to be Protectors of Aborigines that it's not funny! I mean our own government by the government policy of talking children away. None of that happened to white people. (163-164)

Sally's mother recounts the difficulties faced by Aboriginal people, explaining that she and her own mother chose not to tell the children about their Aboriginal heritage out of fear they would suffer as a result. She states, "It was after the visit from the Welfare lady that Mum and I decided we would definitely never tell the children they were Aboriginal. We were both convinced they would have a bad time. Also, if word got out, another Welfare person might come and take them away" (305). Initially, both her mother and grandmother are reluctant to discuss their Aboriginal background, but Morgan persuades them to share their stories, which she records to reconstruct her cultural identity.

After gathering information about Corunna Downs, where her grandmother and great uncle were born, Morgan decides to visit the location to further explore her family's history. Accompanied by her mother, she visits Corunna and is shown the house described by Arthur and her grandmother. She observes the site with creativity and excitement, imagining the past:

It was the same one Nan and Arthur had known in their day. We saw where the old kitchen had been, the date Palm Nan had talked about, and further over in one of the back sheds, the tank machine where Albert has lost his fingers [...] It was concrete evidence that what Arthur had told us and what Nan had mentioned were all true" (229).

Morgan and her mother even imagine the childhood days of Daisy and Arthur, as reflected in Morgan's words:

We were both trying to imagine what it would have been like for the people in old days. Soft, blue hills completely surrounded the station. They seemed to us mystical and magical. We easily imagined Nan, Rosie, Lily, and Albert, sitting exactly as were now, looking off into the horizon at the end of the day. Dreaming, thinking... (229).

Morgan's journey takes her across places like Port Hedland, Marble Bar, Corunna Downs Station, and Yandeearra, each step bringing her closer to her family's roots. In Port Hedland, an elderly man reveals she is connected to many in the community, deepening her sense of belonging. At Yandeearra, Billy welcomes her into her ancestral group and assures her she has a place she can always return to. These moments are transformative for both Morgan and her mother, allowing them to reconnect with their heritage and community. Morgan feels a surge of pride and fulfillment as she uncovers her Aboriginal identity. Her mother, Gladys, echoes this newfound wholeness, saying, "All my life, I've only been half a person. I don't think I really realized how much of me was missing until I come to North" (233). Through sharing her family's story with the world, Morgan brings the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians into the spotlight, becoming a powerful voice for those long pushed to the margins.

CONCLUSION

By sharing her family's story, Sally Morgan highlights the experiences of Indigenous Australians and gives voice to those often marginalized. *My Place* goes beyond personal history to examine the complexities of Aboriginal identity, culture, and ancestry. As Morgan uncovers her family's hidden stories, she reveals the pain, discrimination, and struggles that have shaped Aboriginal lives. Morgan's search for her roots shows that identity is deeply connected to history, family, culture, and place. Learning about her past allows her to reclaim aspects of her identity that were once hidden. Her story reflects the experiences of many Indigenous Australians who have worked to preserve their culture despite exclusion and oppression. By valuing family memories and personal stories, Morgan challenges dominant narratives that have often ignored or misrepresented Aboriginal voices.

In this way, *My Place* transforms silence into expression. Morgan's writing creates space for Aboriginal experiences to be heard, remembered, and recognized. Her work shows that sharing personal narratives can resist marginalization and support the

reclamation of identity. The shift from silence to voice is central to Morgan's understanding of belonging and place. Ultimately, *My Place* shows that reclaiming the past is essential to reclaiming identity. By recovering her family history, Morgan reconnects with her Aboriginal heritage and builds a stronger sense of belonging. Her narrative emphasizes that Indigenous stories are vital to Australian history and must not be silenced or forgotten. By sharing these experiences, Morgan restores dignity and visibility to those whose voices have often been overlooked. *My Place* stands as a significant Aboriginal autobiography and a powerful statement on identity, memory, cultural survival, and the search for belonging.

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