

A SAGA OF LOST EXISTENCE: MY PLACE

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My Place is a book by Sally Jane Morgan, an Australian Aboriginal writer. Born on 18th January 1951 this talented person is an author, dramatist and artist. Her works are read and liked in Australia as well as in other parts of the world. She belongs to the Aboriginal descent from the Bailgu people of Pilbara region of western Australia. My Place is an autobiography written in 1987. Curiosity about the past and actual roots has compelled the author to write this book. Because she was kept away from the fact that she belonged to an Aboriginal community and was raised as an Indian. Not much has been written about the Aboriginal people, but this book is a milestone in Aboriginal literature. Many Australians were curious about the Aboriginal community and got to know about it through the book My Place.

Aboriginal Australians, also referred to as Aborigines, are people whose ancestors were indigenous to the Australian continent, that is to mainland Australia or to the island of Tasmania, before British colonisation of the continent began in 1788. Since 1995, the Australian Aboriginal flag, designed in 1971 by the Aboriginal artist Harold Thomas has been one of the official “Flags of Australia” under section 5 of the Flags Act 1953. The category “Aboriginal Australians” was coined by the British after they began colonising Australia in 1788, to refer collectively to all people they found already inhabiting the continent and later to the descendants of any of those people. Until the 1980’s, the sole legal and administrative criterion for inclusion in this category was race.

The book is called as My Place because everyone on the earth has a place and belongs to some or the other place. Place and people are identical and each belongs to and with the other. It is said that our body is made up of mud and after death we have to be one with the mud. Everybody wants to be one with the earth from where they have come, everyone loves the roots. This book is a tribute to the power of the land. Black history is quite well-known to the world and the Blacks have tried hard to maintain their existence on the earth. The great Indian freedom struggle is also a great example of people fighting for their own place. The Aborigine’s attachment for their own place is depicted in the book. It provides the best opportunity for reconciliation between Whites and Blacks because it is something that White people can acknowledge too, if they are humble enough and ready to recognize the obvious.

In this book, recounts of several of Morgan’s family members are told. The story setting revolves around Morgan’s own home town, Perth, Western Australia and also Corunna Downs. She has written a heart-touching memoir about her discovery and exploration of her family’s aboriginal Australian roots. Morgan describes her childhood in a working class family in

Perth, the largest city on the southwest coast of Australia. Her father had fought and was captured by the Germans in world war II and was fighting a losing battle with what we would now probably call post traumatic stress disorder, made worse by his drinking. Morgan was still in grade school when he died. Her mother and Nan, the grandmother who lived with them, decided to keep the children from knowing that they were Aborigines. They had tremendous fears that they would be declared unfit and the children would be taken away. Because of the white men in their lineage, only the grandmother was dark enough to be easily identified as a “blackfellow”.

It is the family’s struggle to stay alive and to keep their children safe. And therefore Sally was kept away from the truth. As a teenager Sally comes to know about her true origin and is shocked and confused. Marrying and raising children of her own, she painstakingly traced down and recorded her family story. She talked with the white women in whose family her grandmother had worked; and found their version of her family’s history was demonstrably false. She also visited the ‘station’ in north-eastern Australia where her family had originally lived. There she found people who had known her grandmother and uncle who accepted her as part of their larger family. Eventually, her great – uncle, mother and grandmother added their stories to her book. Her memoirs end on a note of reconciliation.

The stories told by her relatives make painfully real the conditions shaping the lives of aborigines in the first half of the twentieth century. They were still under the total control of the particular white family that settled in their home regions. Although slavery was not legally in existence, their lives resembled that of slaves since they literally had no options but to obey powerful whites. Both Morgan’s grandmother and her great – uncle were taken away from their parents as children and had never seen them again. Her great- uncle was sent to a violent and abusive “school” from which he was able to run away and eventually establish himself on a small farm. Her grandmother was sent as a child to serve in the household of her “owner” in Perth.

Nan spent most of her life as a domestic servant in that household and her story resembles those told by the women who have suffered a lot. She was expected to play with and serve the family’s children who were only a few years younger than she was. The family claimed that they loved her and treated her as part of their family. Sally’s mother Glad and grandmother Nan (Daisy) combine to rear the children, attempting to disguise their aboriginality by claiming they are of Indian origin. After Glad’s admission of their aboriginal background, the structure of the book changes, the emphasis then shifts from Sally herself to the histories of her mother and grandmother. More information is disclosed when Sally’s great-uncle Arthur (Daisy’s brother) appear. Arthur and Daisy were born on Corunna Downs station near Marble Bar, owned by the Drake-Brookman family in the 1890’s, the offspring of a full-blood aboriginal woman and a white man. As all children of aboriginal women and white men were taken away from the mother to be raised, Daisy later went to Perth as a servant in the Drake-Brockman household and her daughter Gladys to the Parkerville children’s home.

Putting in blood and sweat in her efforts to get at the truth of her background and to fully trace her family history, Sally and her mother travelled to the Corunna Downs area. Both Gladys and then Nan felt compelled by that journey and its emotional impact to elaborate the painful history of all that happened in their lives. From it all Sally Morgan finally came to understand her ‘place’. The true importance of ‘My Place’ is that it contains a story, the essence of which was the story of many people around the world. countless Many people of different origins have suffered and struggled tirelessly to find their original place. The stories of Daisy, Arthur and

Gladys Corunna are narrated in a simple manner. They are not exaggerated. But they give us an account of the sufferings of a particular community of no reason.

This book plays an important role in Australian aboriginal literature because for the first time it provides non- aboriginal readers with knowledge of hidden indigenous history. Although the story is about Morgan's family life, it is also a powerful political narrative. Along with the story of Morgan's family we come to know about the laws and Government policies of the past which have affected the lives and personalities of the people. Sally Morgan's mother and grandmother kept quiet for a long time but Sally brought the truth before the world through her book *My Place*.

References

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