THE EMPOWERING AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE VOICE OF THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN WRITERS IN S. MORGAN'S *MY PLACE*

Lamia MECHGOUG* / Doç. Dr. Salim KERBOUA**

Abstract: Women marginalization has always been a constitutive element of colonial discourses. These discourses often depict women of subaltern groups as biologically and culturally inferior. However, powerful voices from the former colonies and emanating from women writers of the postcolonial period have challenged these stereotypes. The present article examines how Aboriginal women writers have looked for ways through which they could express their voices, unveil colonial oppression, present their people's history from their own perspective, and reclaim their ancestral identity. The article emphasizes Sally Morgan's autobiographical novel *My Place* as a postcolonial counter discourse that enables its author to act as a spokeswoman of her society and to empower her Aboriginal identity. The article engages Morgan's work in the quest for this identity, and it aims at revealing that her major concerns are to achieve self-discovery, transmit the history of her people, and reassert her identity.

Key Words: autobiography, Aboriginal women, colonial discourse, counter discourse, identity, self-discovery

GÜÇLENDİRİCİ OTOBİYOGRAFİ: S. MORGAN'IN MY PLACE'İNDAKİ ABORİJİN KADIN YAZARLARIN SESİ

Öz : Bu makale, kolonyal söylemlerde kadınların marjinalleşmesi konusuna ışık tutmaktadır. İkincisi, madun grupların kadınlarını biyolojik ve kültürel olarak aşağı olarak tasvir eder. Ancak, postkolonyal dönemde eski sömürgelerden güçlü seslerin ortaya çıkması ve kadın yazarlar tarafından temsil edilmesi bu tür klişelere meydan okudu. Bu kadın yazarlar, seslerini ifade edebilecekleri, tarihlerini kendi bakış açılarından sunabilecekleri ve atalarından kalma kimliklerini geri kazanabilecekleri yollar aradılar. Böylece, 1980'lerde postkolonyal alanlardan kadın yazarlar, kişisel deneyimlerini anlatmanın ve halkının gerçek imajını yansıtmanın bir yolu olarak otobiyografik romanlar yazmaya başvurdular. Aborijin Avustralyalı yazar Sally Morgan da bu kadın yazarlar arasında yer alıyor. Otobiyografik romanı My Place aracılığıyla Morgan, toplumunun sözcüsü olarak hareket eder. En büyük arzusu kendini keşfetmek ve halkının tarihini aktarmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: otobiyografi, Aborijin kadınları, kolonyal söylem, karşıt söylem, kimlik, kendini keşfetme.

ORCID ID : 0000-0001-5388-440X*/ 0000-0002-6642-5453**
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* Mohamed Khider Biskra Üniversitesi, Cezayir.
** Mohamed Khider Biskra Üniversitesi, Cezayir.

1. Introduction

During the colonial period, people of subaltern groups and women in particular have always been subject to oppression and marginalization by their colonizer. This is the case with Aboriginals in Australia who have been exploited, subdued, and denied their Aboriginal identity, land and history by the whites who colonised their land. In fact, Aboriginal women were the most oppressed group of their community. Such marginalization has been transferred to literature where the colonial discourse neglects women of subaltern groups, suppresses their voices and represents them as inferior. However, the postcolonial period brought changes in the way those marginalized groups are represented.

A new wave of Aboriginal women writers emerged on the literary scene as a powerful voice to be reckoned with. Those writers sought to bring to the forefront those stories of Aboriginal women which have been suppressed and hidden in the dominant discourse and to correct those misrepresentations which were associated to them. Thus, in the 1980s, Aboriginal women writers got recourse to the writing of autobiographical novels where they were prolific in this genre more than any other (Brewster xviii). Their inclination toward the writing of autobiographies is fueled by their strong belief in the possibility to reclaim their Aboriginal identity and their annihilated history through their personal experiences. The Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan is among this wave of women writers who seek to express their suppressed voice to the world through her autobiographical writing. This article probes the way Morgan makes use of her personal experience to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal women in particular and her community in general. The article attempts to uncover Morgan's self-discovery of her Aboriginality, the reclaim of her identity and the reconstruction of her personal history.

2. Aboriginal Women's Autobiographies

The autobiography is regarded as a way of defining and understanding the self as it indicates a combination of the self which involves their experience and the text which stands for their country. Both self and text are viewed as one entity (Westphalen, 2012: 111). One of the major characteristics of this genre is the concept of growth in the sense that there is a journey from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to knowledge. Such journey gives the autobiographer a sense of discovery of her/his identity (Muchiri, 2008: 42).

The concept of experience is among the essential features of the autobiography. The latter involves the narration and the interpretation of the autobiographer's own experience (Muchiri, 2008: 46). It is often concerned with the development of her/his personality and then the self- reflection of such life

experience (Kelly, 2005: 12-13). In fact, the experience that is incorporated in the autobiography cannot be simply regarded as personal; it also involves "an interpretation of the past and the author's place in a culturally and historically specific present" (Muchiri, 2008: 46). Additionally, the use of the author's name in the autobiography is an indicator of identity and it contributes in her/his reproduction of the real. Indeed, the presence of the autobiographer's name can be regarded as a guarantee of authority and credibility. The writer tells her/his life story in the eyes of her/his reader and the use of the name works "as an autobiographical signature that seals the contract of trust between the autobiographer and the reader" (Muchiri, 2008: 47-48).

It is worth mentioning that the autobiography gives the chance to the formerly voiceless people like women of subaltern groups to speak by telling their own experience to the world in their own voice. It highlights their incessant quest for a voice, their desire to be heard, and their struggle to define themselves as different from those stereotypes provided by society and the dominant culture and discourse (Muchiri, 2008: 69). The autobiography has thus given space to Aboriginal women writers to speak and to construct their sense of self through their textual production. As a subaltern group, they have found a way through which they can define their position in a society full of prejudice (Valente, 2008: 163).

Aboriginal women autobiographies serve as an act of resistance against all forms of marginalization they have been exposed to (Kelly, 2008: 35) by the colonial discourse. Through such discursive strategy, Aboriginal women challenge the colonial discourse that has sought to erase their identity, has imposed a dominating extraneous culture, and has repressed indigenous voices. By drawing upon their history in their autobiographies, Aboriginal women writers seek to challenge those "fixed and stereotyped" representations (Brewster, 2015: xiv) and thus to prove themselves as valid voices. In that sense, Kumar (2015) asserts that:

> "Aboriginal women fight … the cultural pressures which have sought to construct them according to someone else's mould. Western theory, language, … - to name few - are foreign constructs in which Aboriginal women do not fit. Therefore an oppressive society controls and manipulates Aboriginal women and in turn dictates how they should behave, think, learn, speak (131)."

By getting recourse to the autobiography, Aboriginal women writers find a way in which they can resist the different pressures that have defined them according to the colonizer's standards and which do not fit their situation.

Aboriginal women writers' stories and history are either erased or altered in the dominant discourse. The awareness of such predicament has motivated them to write their autobiographies with the aim to present their Aboriginal

history from their own perspective. Smith and Watson argue that Aboriginal women's autobiographies allow them to "write themselves into history …[and to] introduce stirring narratives of self discovery" (qtd. in Valente, 2008, 163). That way, they are able to present themselves as different people with different history and identity.

It is noteworthy that autobiographies by Aboriginal women writers are regarded as a "historical discourse …distinct from fiction" (Westphalen, 2012: 111) where the history of Aboriginals is strongly present. Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that " Indigenous women's [autobiographies] are testimony to …the pain and …dispossession in many forms …[they] reveal various creative strategies developed and deployed for survival and resistance … [s]elf-presentation by indigenous women is a political act" (qtd. in Westphalen, 2008: 109). Most of their autobiographical writings are concerned with expressing truth about their own experience as indigenous people and about their annihilated history (Westphalen, 2012: 112).

Through their autobiographies, Aboriginal women writers aim at challenging "colonial perspectives of history, identity, culture" and in return at providing an alternative to what has been produced in the dominant discourse. Moreover, these writers endeavour to recall that forgotten or omitted Aboriginal history. The reconstruction of their history through their self-life writing would enable them to reclaim their place as well as their culture (Westphalen, 2008: 114-115). In fact, as history is essential in the construction of place, Aboriginal women writers attempt to reconstruct it in order to recover their sense of belonging (Ghosh, 2018: 242), for "what it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: History and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates 'us' and not others " (Ashcroft et al, 1995: 355).

By devoting space for their Aboriginal history in their autobiographical writings, Aboriginal women writers aim at emphasizing the fact that although Australia has gained its independence, Aboriginals remain in a situation of internal colonialism as they are still subdued by white Australians who do not regard them as human being but rather as a sub-race. Their inferiority is even maintained by law as Marcia Langton confirms: "As soon as they got here …they went on constantly working to wipe out our culture, our language and our people" (qtd. in Kumar, 2015: 8). Aboriginal women writer's autobiographies uncover the different policies and forms of oppression that the Australian government has followed against Aboriginals in order to assimilate them in their white society and culture. One of the racist policies developed against Aboriginals is the policy of eliminating "the population of mixed blood Australians by separating mixed-race Aboriginal children from their

mothers" (Morton, 2010: 169). Aboriginal children of mixed ethnicity were taken from their mothers by force and exploited. To reinforce the assimilation of Aboriginals, the government taught Aboriginal children Australian history, literature and language while their Aboriginal history and language were marginalized (Kumar, 2015: 27).

Aboriginal women writers also highlight through their autobiographies the way the Australian government has followed a divide and rule policy where a binary opposition of white / black has been created. Such policy sought to destabilise the life of Aboriginal people and of women in particular as they have been the most exploited ones as servants for white families (Nandana and Varsha, 2018: 1984) where they have been badly treated and sexually exploited by white men. These latter, refused to acknowledge their names as the fathers of their children and they even forced Aboriginal women to remain silent over such matter(qtd. in Nandana and Varsha, 2018: 1982). Such images of Aboriginals' suffering are presented by Aboriginal women writers in their autobiographies as a metaphor for the colonization of their land (Gilfedder, 2001: 210).

Aboriginal women writers devote a significant space for their history out of their awareness that white men have overlooked it in their books of Australian history. This is clearly emphasized by Franz Fanon (1967) when, speaking about colonizer's books of history, states that:

> "The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves (40)."

In the above quote, Fanon highlights the fact that the colonizer as the writer of history seeks to adapt history to its own needs where the true nature of its invasion of other people's lands is not stated in its books of history and the history which is presented through its books is not the real version of the colonized people's history but rather its own created version of history.

It is worth noting that Aboriginal women autobiographies involve a journey of discovery to the their ancestor's land which ends with their selfdiscovery, the discovery of their Aboriginal origins and history and the fulfilment of their quest for their identity which has been lost due to their displacement as there is a strong "relationship between self and place" (Ghosh, 2018: 241). In fact, displacement of Aboriginals makes them torn between the colonizer's culture and history where they are not accepted and their own culture and history which they are not aware of as they have not been trans-

mitted to them by their families out of the fear of the colonizer (Ghosh, 2018: 245).

What makes Aboriginal women autobiographies unique and different is this involvement of the community with the individual (Kumar, 2015: 132). There is a shift in narrative from the individual to the community embodied in this return to their native land and to their extended family which also serves to reinforce their sense of belonging and their Aboriginality (Westphalen, 2012: 124-125). That is, in their autobiographies "experience is fundamentally social and relational, not something ascribed separately within the individual" and as their writings depend on collective memories between Aboriginal women, their families and their community, they tend " to express the self as part of others and others as part of the self within and across generations" (Kumar, 2015: 132-133).

3. *My Place* as an Autobiographical Counter-Discourse

Through her autobiographical novel *My Place*, Sally Morgan constructs a counter discourse through which she can write herself into the dominant discourse as a powerful voice able to speak for herself instead of being marginalized and silenced. By getting recourse to the autobiography as a genre for subaltern women, she chooses to reflect through her personal experience the suffering and the marginalization of Aboriginal women; women who have encountered all sorts of subjugation and displacement by the white people. Through her self-life story, Morgan makes her voice as a woman of a subaltern group who speaks for her community heard by the world.

3.1 Unveiling Displacement and Exploitation of the Aboriginal Subaltern

In her autobiographical novel, Sally Morgan spots light on the way Aboriginal people and women in particular are displaced from their land, their origin, their culture and their history in an attempt to erase their Aboriginality. She draws upon her personal experience and recalls the displacement of her Aboriginal family from their land and the attempt to assimilate them in the white society. Due to such displacement from their land, children of Aboriginal families grow ignorant of their origins. In *My Place*, the character of Sally shares her experience with the reader and conveys her voice as an Aboriginal girl who ignores her origins from her childhood, but who always feels herself different from white people. She starts to observe the way her white classmates at school lack the strong affection that she shares with her sibling. She recalls an incident which happened at school when one of her classmates told her that she looked different and peculiar in her relationship with her family. She recalls him telling her that she and her family were related to

each other just like a glue: "You really think your family's normal? … you've got the most abnormal family I've ever came across " (Morgan, 1987: 45,133).

Sally Morgan devotes a space in her autobiographical novel for the reconstruction of her lost Aboriginal history. She recalls the different policies followed by the Australian government toward Aboriginals in order to eliminate their culture and history. In the novel, Sally narrates how she and other aboriginal children are forced to go to school by the white government and the hatred she has developed toward school that she regards as some kind of military institution (Morgan, 1987: 22). She expresses her view about school through the army song that her white father has taught her and which she keeps singing when she is in class " I'm in the army now" (25). By regarding school as an army, Sally sends a message to her reader that Aboriginals and their land are still under internal colonialism. At school, Sally does not learn about her Aboriginal history and culture but is rather taught about white Australian history, literature and culture. Marcia Langton asserts that it was one of the policies carried by the Australian government to assimilate Aboriginals and to erase their history and identity. To Langton, "As soon as they got here …they went on constantly working to wipe out our culture, our language and our people" (qtd. in Kumar, 2015: 8).

The character of Sally also calls attention to those racist policies pursued against Aboriginals and which aim at eliminating them. Aboriginal children of mixed-ethnicity have been separated from their mothers under the pretext of getting them educated. However these children have been exploited. This is the case with Aboriginal women were exploited as servants for white families, and were then sexually exploited by white men. The latter refused to acknowledge being the fathers of Aboriginal children and forced their victims to remain silent over their exploitation. Such policies could be traced in the novel through the character of Gladys, Sally's mother. Gladys has been given the chance to tell her story of being separated from her mother and placed in Parkville Children 's Home in order to be educated as Aboriginals are not worth of bringing up a child of mixed-race blood. By devoting a part in the novel for her mother 's story, Gladys narrates how whites managed to wash her memory. The only things she remembers are her tears at Parkville and the moment when white kids are visited by their parents. She has wished to have a family to visit her, but Aboriginals have not been given the permission to see their kids (Morgan, 1987: 316-317).

The character of Sally highlights also her uncle Arthur's displacement from his land by devoting another part for his story about their lost origins and history. He tells her the way he and his sister Daisy have been taken from

their parents and their land Corunna and where they were not given equal rights as whites in their society. They were rather silenced and ignorant of their parents and even of their age as it is the case with him and his sister Daisy (Morgan, 1987: 222). Sally recalls how Arthur narrates the attempts of the Australian government to erase their Aboriginality for the purpose of assimilation. He describes how the dominating authorities taught his brother Albert to speak English, to adopt what they consider as appropriate table manners, and to espouse the lifestyle, culture, and religion of whites. To describe Aboriginals' refusal of white education, Arthur evokes an episode in which he runs away. Caught and brought back to school, he is not allowed to speak his "blackfella" that he likes. So he speaks it far from their eyes. Being displaced from their culture and original land to a different way of life and society makes Arthur and many Aboriginals long for their origins: "…I always wish I'd never left there. It was my home" (Morgan, 1987: 232).

Arthur uncovers the process of Aboriginals displacement from their origins and the government's attempt to obliterate their identity. He reveals the way the government has deprived Aboriginals of their ancestral names as it is the case with him and his sister Daisy (Morgan, 1987: 232); and paradoxically, neither Daisy nor any other Aboriginal has a certificate which proves their identity as the Australian government has deprived them of it (Morgan, 1987: 402).

As a counter-discourse which seeks to question the dominant colonial narrative representing women and Aborigines as biologically inferior, *My Place* unveils a hidden part of Aboriginal history. A history where Aboriginals were treated as animals by white Australians. In that sense the character of Arthur and his story is a striking example. He remembers:

> "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 …Sometimes, we'd hear about white men goin' shooting blackfellas for sport, just like we was some kind of animal …things was hard for the blackfellas in those days (Morgan, 1987: 227)."

Arthurs recalls the way natives were sent to fight in wars, but were not considered citizens nor allowed to vote. As he explains to Sally, Aborigines are in their own land, but they never feel free. To him, "the trouble is that colonialism isn't over yet. We still have white Australia policy against the Aborigines …They say there's been no difference between black and white, we all Australian. That's a lie" (Morgan, 1987: 267).

3.2. The Quest for an Ancestral Identity

As an autobiographical novel which seeks to challenge the dominant discourse, Morgan's *My Place* incorporates a quest for Aboriginal identity where

the character of Sally undertakes a journey to discover her ancestor's land. Her interest in her cultural and territorial heritage starts once one of her classmates asks her about her origins. Sally is unable tell her that she is Australian while her classmates think she is different from them. Once she is home, she starts her questions about her origins. To her, "the kids at school want to know what country we come from. They reckon we're not Aussies. Are we Aussies, Mum?' …'Come on, Mum, what are we?" Her mother remains silent over their origin, and she asks her to say that she is Indian (Morgan, 1987: 45). However, it is her sister Jill who unveils their origins. She makes her aware that they are Aborigines and that pupils at school call them "boongs," an insulting word for Aboriginals. Jill tells Sally that whites prevent their children from dealing with Aboriginal children as they view the latter as "a bad influence" (Morgan, 1987: 121-122).

Once she is alone, Sally starts to question herself on "what did it really mean to be aboriginal" (Morgan, 1987: 179). She makes it her goal to find an answer to this question if she wants to be heard as a marginalized Aboriginal and if she wants to reclaim what has been lost from her history and identity. Despite her mother's fear to speak their identity, Sally keeps digging for a clue that would lead her to discover her origins. Her grandmother warns her that if she tells people her identity, she will place herself in trouble (Morgan, 1987: 348). Gradually, Sally manages to convince her mother to speak and to avow that they are Aborigines. Her mother nonetheless belittles her behaviour as she states that the silence over her identity is just "a little white lie" (Morgan, 1987: 170). Thus, the protagonist starts her quest for identity encouraged by the visit of her grandmother's brother Arthur whom she thinks will help her to solve her puzzle.

Encouraged by her mother and Arthur to look for her past, Sally applies for a scholarship to Corunna (Morgan, 1987: 170), and then, her journey of self-discovery begins. Being aware that her Aboriginal history has been erased by White Australian government, Sally decides to construct her people's own history by writing a book about the history of her family (Morgan, 1987: 190). One can here recall Ashcroft et al's idea that "what it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates 'us' and not others" (355). Thus, Sally starts digging in Australian books of history, expecting to find anything about Aborigines. At Battey Library, she finds books of stories that are pretexts for white's exploitations of Aborigines (Morgan, 1987: 192). She gets angry at having the voice of Aboriginals silenced in those books. She understands that:

"There's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aborigi-

> nal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at, ...There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them (Morgan, 1987: 208)."

In fact, Sally's discovery that Aboriginal history has been marginalized and played down in Australian books of history, and that the suffering of her people has been neglected. This encourages her to be the spokeswoman of her people and to try to recover what is lost.

Sally makes her self-discovery journey to her grandmother's and Uncle's birthplace Corunna (Morgan, 1987: 269). There, she discovers her Aboriginal identity through her relatives. She discovers her native language that has been erased by the colonizer and her culture (Morgan, 1987: 279). Being in her ancestor's land has given her a sense of belonging, and she realizes that she has finally found her place and that all the pieces of her puzzle are being placed together (Morgan, 1987: 294). For the first time, Sally feels she has a place to belong to, an identity she can relate to, and a voice she can express to the world:

> "We were different people now. What had begun 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 ...To think I nearly missed all this. All my life, I've only been half a person. I don't think I really realised how much of me was missing until I came North (Morgan, 1987: 294-295)."

Through the words above, Sally expresses the feeling of being complete human being with an identity different from the one imposed by the colonizer. Her journey which has started from innocence ends with knowledge about her origins.

4. Conclusion

The postcolonial autobiographical narrative has proved to be a genuine means to reassert one's history, culture, and identity. With regard to Aboriginal women writing, Morgan's *My Place* illustrates how the postcolonial woman writer succeeds in empowering her "self" through historical and cultural exploration of her people's experience under colonization. Morgan does so in showing her journey into the past; one that starts with ignorance and innocence, and ends with full knowledge and discovery of her people's tragic history. The counter discourse developed in *My Place* thus disputes and deconstructs the traditional colonial narrative, and ultimately leads to the affirmation of the author's self-assertiveness.

Morgan's self-life story also reveals an intersectional empowerment of her identity as a woman and as an Aborigine. By moving from her "self" to her community and family, Morgan has been able to make her grandmother and mother speak after they have been silenced for many years and she has managed to make the voice of Aboriginal people and women in particular heard. Hence, through the character of Sally, Morgan has produced a counter discourse which is effective enough to interrogate the dominant discourse and its fixed representations of Aboriginals in general and women in particular as lesser beings, without identity and heritage. It also questions the alleged benign role of the colonial power in Aboriginal history. Morgan (and her self-reflecting character Sally) has reconstructed and transmitted her own version of Aboriginal history as it has been experienced by her own family, a history written from the perspective of the woman subaltern rather than from the perspective of their colonial power.

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