

Sally Morgan's *My Place*: Trauma, Generational Gap and Partnership Alternatives in Australian literature

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*How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were.
We would have survived, but not as a whole people.
We would never have known our place.*
Sally Morgan

Introduction: Dismantling Aboriginal Cultures

As we evolve, trauma evolves, and we struggle to find a lifelong balance in order to survive, which sometimes means erasing completely our origins.

In the autobiography *My Place*, Sally Morgan presents her story together with the biographies of her relatives and ancestors. The book is an important opportunity to understand how different generations were affected by the socio-historical scenario in Australia during the British Aboriginal oppression and white-colonial takeover of their lands.

By analysing some sections of her outstanding, private and most delicate book we, as readers, can perceive how trauma has passed through different generation, showing how the most common feeling of these communities and families has been fear.

Beginning with the direct experience of growing up in a “dominator” (Eisler 1987) white, patriarchal and colonialist society in which terror was the norm - and brought people to forget or better hide their past - Morgan shows how one of the goals of the colonial project was to raise children in complete ignorance.

“Nan, what people we are?”

She was immediately on the defensive.

“I’m not stupid, you know. I’m not saying nothing, do you hear?”

[...]

Inside, I felt all churned up, but I didn’t know why. I had accepted by now that Nan was dark, and that our heritage was not shared by most Australians, but I hadn’t accepted that we were Aboriginal. I was too ignorant to make such a decision, and too confused. I found myself coming back to the same old question: if Nan was Aboriginal, why didn’t she just say so?

The fact that Mum and Nan made consistent denials made me think that I was barking the wrong tree.

(Morgan 2013: 105)

In her story, Morgan highlights also the problem of coming into terms with mixed heritage, since a lot of children were born after colonialists' violence against aboriginal women:

We was worried 'bout you kids, then. We thought the government might come and get you. They didn't like people like us rearin' kids with white blood in them. Seems like no one took account of the black blood. You belonged to us, Bill's family didn't want you. You kids loved the bush, you got things passed down to you from Gladdie and me. Things that you only got 'cause we was black.

I tried to stay out the way after Bill died. Gladdie could pass for anythin'. You only had to look at me to see I was native. We had to be careful. 'Tell them they're Indian', I told her. 'You don't want them havin' a bad time.

(Morgan 2013: 348)

The horror

Like in the past, even nowadays we live in times of wars and oppression, nations raging against each other, just to assert power and control over one another. We can perceive this everywhere because, since the end of World War II, there have been plenty of conflicts around the world. Nevertheless, as we can see in the excerpts below, the main wars and struggles that dominator societies and cultures perpetuate is, in reality, a battle on people's psychological health and well-being.

By conditioning people with fear, we keep on forgetting the beauty of the past, the positive connection people had with the environment, the "partnership" (Eisler 1987) relations they built. We live in a world in which the main aim is to be in control of our incomes in order "to be able to survive". I remember a speech from an Italian bishop this summer, during the World Youth Day in Lisbon, when he argued that the main illness of our society today is individualism. Even though I believe that individualism, in human history, has helped us being more self-conscious and rely on our inner possibilities, I truly think the main threat for our spirit is fear and, in particular, the strategies that "dominator" media and propaganda push us through constantly, every day. This is similar to what happened in Australia with Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, Morgan remembers:

Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. I know Nan doesn't agree with what I'm doing. She thinks I'm trying to make trouble, but I'm not. I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story.

(Morgan 2013: 165)

And later, in the novel, she stresses on the desire for a cultural and "transformational change" (Eisler 1987) for her people:

Well, I'm hopin things will change one day. At least, we not owned any more. I was owned by the Drake-Brockmans and the government and anyone who wanted to pay five shillings a year to Mr Neville to have me. Not much, is it? I know it's hard for you, Sal, hard for you to understand. You different to me. I been scared all my life, too scared to speak out. Maybe if you had my life, you'd be scared, too.

(Morgan 2013: 350)

Feeling lost

As Morgan's narrative demonstrates, the more we get apart from our roots, the more we crave for connection. And we do not even know how to articulate this need of/for belonging.

We are driven to think that the only thing we need is to fit in a pre-determined society, bypassing traditions, ancestral experiences, our native roots. Indeed, these are more and more neglected by contemporary societies, which believe to be technologically advanced, or "civilised", thus forgetting the past, or even trusting that we do not need it anymore. In short, we have lost the deep connections with nature and our sense of community. We are always ready to judge anyone or to lead peoples against one another. As Morgan reminds:

An old full-blood lady whispered to me 'You don't know what it means, no one comes back.

You don't know what it means that you, with light skin, want to own us'

We had lumps in our throats the size of tomatoes, then. I wanted desperately to tell her how much it meant to us that they would own us.

(Morgan 2013: 228-229)

And in another passage of the book:

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 we were proud of it.

Mum, in particular, had been very deeply affected by the whole trip.

'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 2013: 233)

And talking about her grandmother:

I knew Mum, like me, was thinking about Nan. We viewed her differently, now. We had more insight into her bitterness. And more than anything, we wanted her to change, to be proud of what she was. We'd seen so much of her and ourselves in the people we'd met.

We belonged, now. We wanted her to belong, too.

(Morgan 2013: 234)

Losing contact with the ancestors

Aboriginal communities in Australia are one of the few native cultures that were able to survive colonial and dominator-patriarchal oppression. These communities kept living with shamanic perspectives and worldviews, thus bridging and bonding the world of the spirits together with the ancestral knowledge of mother nature.

The colonial project and its constant and violent subjugation brought native cultures to erase or even be ashamed of their heritage. The aim was to lose contact with their past, and one of the most effective strategies for this was preventing Aboriginal peoples to talk and keep alive their traditions, customs, cultures, so as to influence the younger generation to forget about their ancestors' past.

Blackfellas know all 'bout spirits. We brought up with them. That's where the white man's stupid. He only believes what he can see. He needs to get educated. He's only livin' half a life.

(Morgan 2013: 344)

In this sense, shamanic practices and rites were seen by colonial rulers as ignorant deeds and traditions:

Now, I tell you something, Sal, this is a sacred thing, so I better speak quiet. I helped your mother with that polio. You see, our family's always had powers that way. I don't want to say no more. Some things I'm telling you 'cause I won't be here much longer.

(Morgan 2013: 346)

Morgan beautifully recalls how her ancestors and the tribe she belonged believed in the power of ancestral knowledge and 'reality':

'Member when we first moved there? Couple of nights, you came out on the back verandah and found Gladdie and me sittin' there, 'member we made you go away? You was always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Well, we was listenin' to music. It was the blackfellas playin' their didgeridoos and singing' and laughin' down in the swamp. Your mother could hear it. I said to her one night, I'm goin' down there and tell those native off. Who do they think they are, wakin' all the white people up. That's when Gladdie told me. She said, Don't go down there Mum, there's no one there, only bush. You see, we was hearin' the people from long ago. Our people who used to live here before the white man came.

(Morgan 2013: 346)

In conclusion, in a world in which at least every person bears within him/herself two cultural heritages, it seems likely to be convinced by Morgan's narrative about our common ethnogenesis, and the fact that we are all part of one nation of the globe. Many are the reasons that might determine ours or our ancestors' forgetting of trauma. These could be colonialism, migration, forced transplantations, or even natural disasters, which prompted people to move from one country to another.

Trauma survives in our DNA, it passes through our relatives and into our bodies as autoimmune diseases or even genetic diseases. From the spirit to the body, the more we get used to suffering the more we want to forget and shadow our difficult memories and experiences. The problem is that usually we do not know which kind of trauma our ancestors suffered. Therefore, it is difficult to observe and recognise hurt and grief that has passed from one generation to the next.

In this regard, Sally Morgan's *My Place* had a deep impact on me, being the daughter of an Argentinian who claims to have native origins, but who never ventured into knowing the truth of her story.

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