



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Reclaiming Aboriginal Identity: A Reading of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and  
Rubi Langford Ginbi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*

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ABSTRACT

Being an aborigine in a white dominated society is a complicated identity. Australia, one of the white governed nations, also owns many aboriginal tribes. They lived harmonious lives in the early period. But European colonization has made a profound effect on the lives of Aborigines in Australia, which led to the total demolition of their native culture, identity and history. As a result the new generation Aborigines have lost their Aboriginal heritage and have been accepted neither by Aborigines nor by whites. This state of being part aborigines has driven their identity in crisis. Indeed they have possessed a unique Aboriginal consciousness that have made them to reclaim their lost voice. Their literature has been used as a platform to represent them with authenticity. Aboriginal women writers, through their autobiographies, have created a space to recover their lost identity.

The present paper addresses the topic of Aboriginality. It tries to explore the process of reclaiming Aboriginal identity in the works of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Rubi Langford Ginbi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. The paper focuses on how these selected writers engage in the reclaiming process, and also tries to locate the changes that occur in the identity of Aborigines in Australia during pre-colonial, colonial and in contemporary time.

Key words: Aboriginal, aboriginal, Identity, Women, Hybridity, Colonialism

The term identity is a multi-dimensional concept, because it is used in diverse context and for different purposes. There is a status of ambiguity found inherent in the term itself. It can be found that it is originated from the Latin word 'idem', means 'the same', which implies identifying identity only with sameness in nature. But the reality is that the concept can define the meaning of who we are, and can bring out the unique characteristics of the person, which make them different from others. Normally, an individual carries personal and collective mode of identities. He/ She has to hold different identities in each phase of life while engaging in specified roles attributed to him/her. These roles are operated through the specific social structure in which the individual lives. It can be suggested that identity is also used as an aid for shaping structure for one's personality, and that makes the individual to create a sense of purpose and direction for his/her life.

It is generally conceived that the issue of identity was not discussed in the past. It is not because those people did not have identities, but the fact that modern societies have been shifted to multicultural, and one's

recognition becomes more competitive than the previous time and should be acknowledged. It is Nelson Foote who has used the term first in the academic arena and the word has become popular in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the concept of identity has been deployed in numerous ways in the field of psychology, social sciences, anthropology, humanities and literature. Several academic debates have been used as platforms for refining this concept and contributed to this field. Erikson, Stanly Hall, and James Marcia are the main proponents and their contributions in negotiating identity formation theory are appreciated. Later, the cultural critic Stuart Hall has opined about the changing nature of identity. He says that there is no fixed identity that can be attributed to an individual for his life period; it evolves through several changes in each phase of life. So it can be understood that formation of identity involves several steps: construction, reconstruction and deconstruction. The politics behind this formation may depend on the nature of identity that an individual tries to hold. Indeed, the cultural critic Kobena Mercer reminds us: "One thing at least is clear - identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (43).

Defining Aboriginal identity or Aboriginality in Australia is a problematic task that cannot be answered with its full spirit of meaning. Simply, it can be suggested that Aboriginal identities are a set of social practices, developed from specific indigenous cultural roots located in Australia. It is not something that is stagnant or something which is subject to constant change. But it does develop, cultivate, and a new aspect of Aboriginality appear to an individual at different stages of life. One of the main legal definitions attributed to the term Aboriginal identity in Australia is "an aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he/ she lives" (Gardiner 4). There are numerous papers produced by many Aboriginal scholars that bring out different notions about the term and their complexities, and their main argument is that the term Aboriginal is pluralist in nature because of the diversity that exists among Aboriginal people. There also stands a major contextual difference in using the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'aboriginal', the former is used to indicate one tribe and the later is used to indicate more than one tribe or group of tribes. The formation of Aboriginality in Australia has been developed through several changes during each course of time, and adopting or assimilating these changes are not an easy task for Aboriginals. For some of them, it is an issue of solving the hybrid situation, and for the rest, it is a process of reclaiming their lost Aboriginality. In his essay entitled 'The End in the beginning: Re (de) finding Aboriginality' Michael Dodson says: "aboriginality is changed from being a daily practice to being a 'problem to be solved" (25). He adds that Aboriginal writers' tasks are not understanding and accepting the colonial constructions of Aboriginality. They are trying to subvert the hegemony that the colonists have made on their representation through social discourses. And they believe that they can create a world of meaning through Aboriginal discourses in which they can relate to themselves, to each other, and to non- Aboriginal people.

In Australia, Aboriginal women face double marginalization (i.e., in patriarchal and in colonial terms). These women's lives have undergone many changes during pre-colonial, colonial and in contemporary time. These women had led pleasing lives before British colonization in Australia, and the roles played by them in Aboriginal societies were parallel to that of men in every aspect of life. But there occurred gradual changes in their lives during colonization. Their identity and culture got completely distorted by the involvement of colonial policies, affected and questioned their self dignity, and they have been marginalized in their own land. In early stages, most of the Aboriginal women identities were constructed in accordance with Eurocentric norms. Since there was no textual evidence produced by any Aboriginal woman in earlier time, the notion of Aboriginality to the outer world was mainly derived from the white author's literary production, and those white notions positioned Aboriginality as uncivilized, subcultural, primitive, trivialised and as low ranked practice. Consequently, they got restricted from attaining normal and respectable life in society, and the authenticity of Aboriginal identity was questioned within them.

These challenging situations lead to the creation of an innate urge in Aboriginal people to think that what it means to be an Aborigine in Australia, and they have started to recover their lost voice through writing, results in the production of Aboriginal literature in written form. This literature has maintained a clear

resistance strategy and power politics towards deconstructing eurocentric definitions of Aboriginality. Later, Aboriginal women also started to participate in it. These women's primary rhetorical practices has revealed that communication and sharing through writing constitutes an important location where Aboriginal women theorize their lives in their own ways. Around the later half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Aboriginal women have dominated the literary space, and their autobiographies have been utilised as a space for shaping and reclaiming their lost identity. They have used the space to counter misinformation and share stories that mainstream historians had sanitised over, and represent the diversity and dynamic nature of their identities within the collective. They have denied the Eurocentric approach of defining Aboriginality in homogenous tone and bring forth the plurality or the heterogeneous approach towards defining the same. As far as their perception is concerned, there is no single aboriginal identity but there are many Aboriginal identities. The Aboriginal activists and writers, Sally and Rubi have possessed well-defined resistance strategies while recording their lives. They have regained the power of authority in creating knowledge on Aboriginality, and present different accounts to Aboriginals' lives in Australia.

The international bestseller *My Place* is a quest narrative telling the story of Sally Morgan's search for the discovery of her aboriginal heritage and history. She has maintained a specific narrative style and has clearly stated the intention behind her writing:

Well, there is almost nothing written from a personal point of view about aboriginal 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. I just try to want to tell a little bit of the other side of the story (Morgan 208).

The above statements reveal the nature of Sally's writing against white norms of Aboriginal identity. Here she tries to tell another version of Aboriginal experience that is entirely different from the story created by whites on Aboriginals.

As far as Sally's identity is concerned, she is part aboriginal, who has an aboriginal mother and white father. It can be identified a huge social stigma and ambiguity concerned with her identity throughout her writing. Many events she has faced in her life bring out the real situation of the half cast children, who is still facing the same in contemporary Australian society. They are accepted neither by Aboriginals and nor by whites, and their identities have been forced to be placed in the hybrid situation. Normally, this situation leads an individual to solve the question that how does he/she can establish an identity without any ambiguity. Here, Sally realizes that there needs a place of belonging that is the main core of establishing the aboriginal identity. Moreover, she realises that an individual can obtain a stable identity only by the conformation of others. So the author makes an explorative journey to find her family heritage, from where she starts her task. The story is rooted in the process of recounting sally's early years. From the childhood itself she was brought up by the members of her own family without identifying her aboriginality, and on many occasions her identity is questioned among his schoolmates because of her light skin. She has been labeled as ugly dirty fellow among her white friends, indicates the racial issues faced by Aboriginals in Australia. The menial treatment that her family experienced from whites reveals another face of racism held in Australia during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Sally matures she slowly realises that she is not Greek or Indian but is aboriginal, inherited from Noongar Community. After identifying her lost Noongar heritage the young woman becomes excited and says: "Before we have nothing. At least now, we've got a beginning" (Morgan 136).

Though Sally has discovered her lost identity she is aware of the fact that as an aborigine in blood she knows nothing about her aboriginality. Her generation is living far from the real aborigines' lifestyles and she did not participate in any of their rituals or social practices before. Then, she asks herself: "I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?" (141). It can be suggested that her lack of awareness of aboriginality is the result of colonization. Many Aboriginals because of Australian Government policies have faced the trauma that sally faced. She says that compulsory mission lives and the removal of light skinned Aboriginal children (stolen generation) from their Aboriginal families have played a crucial role in it. Hence, the finding of the meaning of the term aboriginality becomes a complicated task for her.

In the second half of the book we can see that Sally is not satisfied in just knowing her newly identified aboriginality. She knows that just knowing and receiving her identity cannot be claimed or accepted by others. There needs a strong thread that links the individual and the identity together. She realizes that one's place of belonging has a significant role to reclaim her aboriginal identity. She finds that it is in the past that she lost her place and it is just in the past that she has to start to retrieve it. Then she decides to make an investigation towards her matrilineal root. She begins to collect the stories told by her uncle and other documents regarding the same and plans to write a book on it. Her writing contains stories of three generations of Noongar women: stories of Sally, her mother (Gladys Corunna) and her grandmother (Daisy Corunna).

Sally's grandmother, Daisy's identity represents the Noongar version of Aboriginality that existed in early times. The account of Daisy Corunna's life reveals painful and brutal treatment faced by Noongar women, separation from family and process of survival encountered by them due to colonization. She is exploited, and is banned freedom, community life, and motherhood. Sally reveals that the Noongar community had their own possession of the land, identity, culture and social practice before colonization. There was a deep relation existed among the members in the Noongar community and they had pride in their own culture. Her grandmother's story reveals that how did their culture and identities get distorted and become marginalized in their own land in the name of the refinement process. Another fact is that in those days Aboriginals had treated like slaves, and Sally has mentioned about it in her work. It brings out the presence of slavery that prevalent in Australian society during 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sally's mother Gladys Corruna's story reveals the changes occurred in Noongar identity during urbanization. Her identity got questioned after she got married to a white man and her wifehood became a failure in one aspect. Sally's story of her mother clearly pictures the alienation she had faced both in Aboriginal and white community. Though she is Noongar in blood she did not get any chance to feel nostalgic about her community. It also brings out the fact that how did the Aboriginal culture like Noongar was destroyed from their land and how did these women was forced to get assimilated in white culture.

When it reaches to the generation of Sally, the quality and the real experience of Aboriginality has been reached at its high level of extinction. Aboriginality, for Sally, has become a problem to be solved. Her journey towards her matrilineal root helped her to reclaim her lost identity with a place of belonging rather than having a neutral status. Many Aboriginal writers have criticized that her aboriginal identity cannot be fully accepted because she has only blood connection to become an aborigine and she doesn't have any real aboriginal experience. As it is mentioned earlier, it can be suggested that being an aborigine is not a fixed status, which evolves many changes during each period. Hence, Sally's identity can be considered as Noongar version of Aboriginal identity. Indeed she can bring out the changes happened to the aboriginal women's identity by presenting the stories of three generations of aboriginal women.

Rubi Langford Ginbi is an aboriginal woman activist, whose writing mainly deals with the past experiences of Aboriginal people, the nature of settler colonialism in Australia and Aboriginal people's survival towards it. It does not merely intend for creating an autobiographical account of her life but it is written essentially to create 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian history from an aborigine's perspective. So her works are found more historical in nature rather than having autobiographical features. She does not write only for intending the self but she always keeps the position of a Bundjalung woman and brought their collective experiences to readers. So it can be suggested that she has written on the behalf of her Koori community and her making of identity is a Koori version of Aboriginal identity.

Ginbi's claiming of identity is entirely different from the strategy adopted by Sally Morgan in her *My Place*. Sally does not have a starting position to build her identity, and she has made a journey towards her root to place herself first, and has started to claim. In the case of Ginbi, she has awareness about her aboriginal identity in the beginning itself, and does not have any kind of uncertainty in her aboriginality. So it is not a task for her to position herself first. So the process of claiming identity for Ruby is a part of theorizing the lives of the Koori community at different times. Another fact is that the resistance mode of writing is found more prevalent in Ginbi's work rather than in the work of Sally.

Rubi Langford Ginbi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is an international human right award winner work, has got wide international attention, and has become a subject in the platform of many academic debates. Indeed it is considered as one of the initial autobiographical works written by a Koori woman. The book narrates lives from their fence, covers the experiences of five Koori generations of familial bond, written in conversational style, and makes a historic record of their community. It can be suggested that her intentional usage of aboriginal words in the text is a part of her political strategy to make these languages to enter into the foreground of world literary platform. The presence of such languages plays an essential role in molding identities.

Ginbi's full name is Ruby Wagtail Big Noise Anderson Rangi Ando Heifer Andy Langford. It is amazing that the name itself indicates the journey she undertakes throughout her life. Ginbi is her aboriginal name and Wagtail (Black swan) is her totem given by the Koori community. The rest part of the names she has acquired through her aboriginal and white partners after she got married each of them at different stages of her life. The name itself comprises both aboriginal and white tags in her life. Indeed, in many interviews she has told that while writing she prefers her aboriginal name Ginbi. This signifies the pride and the aboriginal consciousness that the author keeps through out her life.

The chapters in the beginning of the book deal with her childhood days, in which she accounts the life of Koori community, familial bond, their religious and spiritual beliefs, their connection with nature, etc. Here, we can understand that family and community bond found strong in Koori community. There was no gender disparity or unnecessary rules identified among them. Each individual had his/her own role to contribute something for the development of the community, and everyone hold a unique aboriginal consciousness that made them distinct and helped to survive. Ginbi says: "The rule was useless in our culture, where survival often depended on being able to stay with friends and relatives"(174).

Ginbi has disclosed the changes that occurred in the lives of Aboriginals during colonization. Family roles completely got distorted. Elder members in their family were displaced from their children, were forced to go for over work to earn money. The lack of parental concern and lack of motherhood haunted many Aboriginal children. Ginbi used to get haunted by the absence of her mother's presence throughout her life. She also says that some Aborigines, especially men, have got addicted to alcohol consumption, which results in the imbalance of family life. The majority got severe health issues because of lack of nutritious food and their changed lifestyles. We can see in Ginbi's life itself that she and two of her children suffered from diseases (like meningitis and hernia) throughout their life period. It can be added that these health issues and illegal death of Aborigines in police custody results in the deduction of Aborigine's number in large, and apart from being a marginal, they have been reverted to the status of minority.

While introducing new members into her writing she describes them by their nature of physic, which is a part of shaping aboriginal identity. In her text, Ginbi has identified them as "Beautiful Black Babies" (Ginbi 70), which shows that they find dignity in being black. The description is written on the photograph of Ginbi's mother is another example of their self pride in their beauty and the harmony of relationship: "I opened the lid and lifted up some clothes and there was a photograph of a beautiful lady in a big white picture hat, sitting on a chair. I stared at the photo and then turned it over. The words said, *you are my sunshine, love Evelyn*" (Ginbi13). Later in the book, she regains the lost status of their identity by bringing her daughter Pearl up. She became the winner of black beauty context held in Australia. This victory symbolizes the public acceptance of Aboriginal women's beauty back.

Ginbi has used her text to tell another version of Australian history. She has written about the maltreatment that Aboriginal people have faced by launching of colonial policies in Australia. She has highlighted that racism, denial of education rights for Aboriginals, providing menial jobs and low wages for Aboriginals (especially for women) and exploitation of Aborigines in the name of Aboriginal Protection Board and Aborigine's status of uncertainty in his/her place of belonging were the major events happened as the result of colonization. These events in the text do not merely portray the pathetic situation of her and her people, but it also indicates how does the aboriginal woman like Ginbi struggles to survive these situations. At the same time she has created her own imaginary space in her text to deconstruct such events. The best

example is that in her school days Ginbi could imagine a classroom in which the black teachers teaching white students. The question regarding assimilation of black into white culture is another main argument put forward by the text. Ginbi says:

The government policy of assimilation by absorption meant splitting up the Aboriginal communities, and I understand what this policy meant as I had four daughters and only one married an Aboriginal. My grandchildren are blond and blue or hazel-eyed, and within two or three hundred years there won't be Aboriginals in suburbia (Ginbi 176).

These lines give clear explanation to the argument that why people like Ginbi do not assimilate in white culture. They are aware about the fact that the assimilation into white culture will result in the annihilation of Aboriginal cultures.

In the second half of the book it can be found that Ginbi's identity is integrated to an Aboriginal activist by participating in Aboriginal renaissance movements. She has become a member and a leader of Aboriginal political movements, and her leadership and active participation have boosted it. So there has been created a lot of benefits for Aboriginal people, and later, their position has been changed to a better status. Apart from engaging in political movements, Ginbi has used her writing as a weapon towards colonial policies, her magazines have been made an attempt to reinstate her people's culture, history and identity. She says: "This meant I could find out some more about my history" (Ginbi 117). The autobiography *Don't Take Your Love to Town* is a one of the output of such writings. For Ginbi her journey of survival has included her reclaiming lost Koori identity back and she has succeeded in it.

To conclude, the autobiographies, *My place* and *Don't Take Your Love to Town* represent the two different version of Aboriginal identity. The authors have maintained their Aboriginal oriented political stands throughout the book, and have represented their communities' identity, culture and history, by which they have attempted to give a meaning and shape for Aboriginal identities. These writers emphasize that it is not possible to homogenize Aboriginal identities. And they work only under the canvases that have multidimensional spaces to represent their diversity.

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