# Evolution of a New Genre: Life Narration in Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* and Sally Morgan's *My Place*

Judith Sophia Lawrence

Indigenous writers transform their truth-based experiences into art form evolving a new genre with realism in their "life-writing" or "Life narration" and "self-writing" modes of expression. As Frederic Jameson has observed, all texts can be read as having an "ideology of form" (76). The texts of the indigenous writers have their own form and ideologies connected with native orature and myth. These writers, in their autobiographies, attempt to subvert the earlier master narratives, also undergo a kind of Bakhtinian "novelisation." They write their own stories narrating their life experiences. Autobiographical stance chosen by Beatrice Culleton in *April Raintree* (1984) and Sally Morgan in *My Place* (1987) is clearly a strategy for the expression of a growing defiance and insubmissiveness on the part of the natives. Both the novels record the reminiscences of the authors and a historiographic depiction of the traumatic experiences in the lives of their kinsmen. This paper attempts to analyse Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* as life-stories or life narratives of the Metis of Canada and Aboriginals of Australia, significant sections of humanity who have been denied their land, history and voice for centuries. Both the writers have attempted to evolve their own genre and counter discourse breaking the boundaries and the conventional categories of Western epistemology.

Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* have a few aspects in common besides that both are postcolonial fiction with autobiographical spell, written by women writers. Beatrice Culleton, a native Canadian writer, through her central characters, April and Cheryl Raintree and their search for self and cultural identities compels the readers to discover the Metis people and their traumatic life experiences and the struggles they underwent to regain their own self-determination and to work towards re-establishing their unique place in Canadian society. Sally Morgan, an Aboriginal writer of Australia, in *My Place* gives a deeply moving account of a search for truth, into which a whole family of three generation is gradually drawn and allowing them to tell their own stories. Sally tries to recreate the history of her people through their struggle to assert their own unique identity.

Penny Petrone in *Native Literature in Canada*, argues that Western epistemology is unable to comprehend Native Literature for various reasons, including its relation to the oral and cultural values of mythology. As she puts it:

> Canada's Native writers have borrowed from Western traditions the forms of autobiography, fiction, drama, and essay. Their uses, however, judged by Western literary criteria of structure, style and aesthetics, do not always conform. They are different because form is only the expression of the fabric of experience, and the experience of the Native writers has been different. (183-184)

The personal experiences of the Native/Aboriginal writers are unique and they cannot be borrowed hence they borrow the forms, especially autobiography to express their feelings and struggles. The borrowed autobiography too undergoes transformation as it is blended with orature and written form. These writers attempt to develop a form of life narration against the conventional form of the genre, autobiography. Petrone also discusses the multiplicity of styles. To her,

> Native writers easily adopt a multiplicity of styles and forms to suit their purposes, and in so doing they are giving birth to a new literature: a written literature that is finally and gratefully being given to us by the first peoples of our country enabling us to hear voices most of us have not heard before, bringing to life people, places, experiences and problems that are uniquely Canadian, yetuniversal too. (184)

What is said about Native writers is applicable to Sally Morgan for she transforms the genre autobiography into a new narrative form of a combination of narratives within a narrative and folklore. The experiences of these writers are authentic and realistic. While narrating their experiences they decolonize the master discourses/ narratives by decolonizing their modes of expression and forms of writing. The unique genre Native/Aboriginal autobiography can very well be termed as "Life Narratives" for they record their real life experiences. In this process both the writers rewrite their Native/Aboriginal culture and heritage in the form of counter discourses to assert their spiritual and deep cultural roots.

Beatrice Culleton, an acclaimed Metis writer of Native Canada, was born at Manitoba in 1947 as the youngest of four children. She became a ward of the Children's Aid Society of Winnipeg at the age of three. She grew up in different foster homes as a displaced person from her family and her people with an exception that once she lived in one foster home with one of her older sisters. Two of her older sisters committed suicide. Her tragic past with unusual experiences contribute to the formation of her fictional rendering, *April Raintree*.

A strong sense of self identity is a pre-requisite to self determination. The central characters in *April Raintree* and *My Place* undertake not only a search for roots but also a search for identity. The two sisters, April and Cheril in *April Raintree*, are silenced victims of racial discrimination that has started even at the school level. Their separation from their family and the sufferings in the foster homes allow April to feel resentful to her heritage. The tracked events in her later life both reinforced and eventually, reversed her misconceptions and negative views of the native and Metis people and help her assert her identity.There are four autobiographies that constitute the structural frame work of *My Place* namely those of Sally Morgan, Arthur, Gladys and Daisy. Sally's quest for the truth about her family heritage and her genuine urge to establish her aboriginal identity links these four autobiographies. Fear of discrimination of the aborigines prevented both Gladys and Daisy revealing their past. It is Sally who is responsible for the emergence of her grandmother and mother from the morass of fear and insecurity. When their feeling of humiliation is exorcized they start asserting themselves. These Autobiographies, *April Raintree* and *My Place* also strive to register resistance and serve as strategies for empowerment through the central characters' quest for identities.

In *April Raintree*, the protagonists, April and Cheryl are two sisters separated very young and cruelly treated in different foster homes. They choose to take two different ways of life amidst physical and psychological tortures. April, the elder and fairer one, is able to assimilate with the white society. Whereas Cheryl develops a militant, political identity at a very young age and grows up to work for Native Canadians at a Friendship Centre. Eventually, Cheryl turns to be an alcoholic and commits suicide while April determines to nurse Cheryl's son, Henry Liberty Lee, as a model for the future Native generation and decides to reclaim her native identity.

Sally Morgan, recognised as one of Australia's best known Aboriginal artists and writers, was born in Perth in 1951, as the eldest of five children. As a child she found

school difficult because of the questions from other students about her appearance and family background. She understood from her mother that she and her family were from India. However, when Sally was fifteen she learnt that she and her sister were in fact of Aboriginal descent, from the Palku people of the Pilbara. This experience of her hidden origins, and subsequent quest for identity, was the stimulus for her first book, *My Place* published in 1987.

In *My Place*, Sally, the eldest of the five children of the family, records her childhood as a time of difficulty. Her father, the veteran of the Second World War, suffers from illness and dies when Sally was a nine year old young girl. Her mother, Gladys, has to do odd jobs like cleaning to make both ends meet. Sally spends most of her childhood days with her young brothers and sisters and her grandmother Daisy. She has to face a difficult time as she was questioned by the fellow students about her identity. She is not always regarded by others in the same way as white children. On pressing her mother about her family background she is told that she is an Indian. However, in the long run, she learns that is a lie, and she is instead descended from Australia's Aborigines. This instigates her to undertake a quest to discover the hidden branches of her family tree. In a way, she attempts to re-present her life as well as the life of her community. John McLeod puts it: "set in Australia, *My Place* is an autobiographical text which explores the history of Sally Morgan's family in the wider context of Australian history" (199).

Morgan's My Place, recognized as a milestone in Indigenous writing, sketches a picture of generational dispossession and denial of land, of kinship, of children stolen away and of wealthy white men who disown them. Sally Morgan's story is personal but it links closely with the history of Aboriginal people in Western Australia. In Reena Mitra's words the novel records "the reminiscences of Sally Morgan and a historiographic depiction of the traumatic experiences in the lives of her kinsmen" (150). The central characters, Sally, Gladys (Mum), Daisy (Nan) and Arthur narrate the exploitation and oppression they have undergone on account of colonial indoctrination and cultural subjugation. Sally's mother Gladys and her grandmother Daisy are frequently reluctant to reveal their pasts, but gradually Sally removes their fear of insecurity and pieces together a story of her Aboriginal inheritance. She travels to the places where her mother and grandmother grew up and meets aboriginal people and tape-records the voices of the members of her family which she transcribes and includes in her autobiography.

The fear of discrimination against Aborigines has persisted in Nan, Sally's grandmother, for a long time and she keeps telling Sally that terrible things will happen to her if she tells people what she is. One such terrible thing that happened is the children were stolen away from the family. A child is entitled to the right to enjoy the familial love and care. This right is denied to half-caste children (children of black mother and white father or vice versa). Considering a half-caste child as a problem created by a problem, the white society evolves with an inhuman solution of seizing the child. The half-caste children are thus separated from their aboriginal fathers or mothers and treated as poor whites. They are then brought up as inferior whites as a way of denying the co-existence of equal but different civilization. The stories narrated in *My Place* uncover the plight of many Indigenous children and communities devastated by government policies and laws which allowed Indigenous children to be taken from their families. Arthur is so fortunate that he has identified his sister Daisy, Sally's grandmother and felt happy as he is reunited with his family.

The white masters treat the Aborigines as objects and the novel *My Place* uncovers the fear that Gladys and Nan felt about authoritative figures. There has been

great injustice done to them. The fear of discrimination has grown into great pain and anguish. The terrifying and heartbreaking experience that Gladys experienced through the Substitutive Care System in Australia reveals how she lost her identity; how the fear of being taken away from her mother scarred her for life; and how her experience as an Aboriginal girl has influenced her life and way of thinking as a woman. It is the experience of being an Aboriginal girl that she wants to shield her children from. She is not denying her children their heritage or culture, or at least she did not intent so. Gladys is merely protecting her children.

When Gladys was three she was put in a children's home, Parkerville, run by Church of England nuns. That time she was too young to realize the separation from the mother. Some of the kids in that home had visitors but to an Aboriginal child it was difficult to get a visitor for "the Aboriginal people had to get permits to travel. Sometimes, they wouldn't give them a permit. They didn't care that they wanted to see their kids" (M P 316). Thus the privilege of meeting their parents on the visitor's day is denied to the Aboriginal kids. Her longing to have a family is expressed as she often prays to God to give her a family.

As for Nan, she has gone through worse circumstances in her days since she belonged to an earlier generation. When she was a child, her brother Arthur was taken away by the whites who gave an assumption that he was getting education so that he could run Corunna Downs Station some day. While recalling her past Nan said, "My poor mother never saw him again" (M P 403). At the Station the black people didn't get enough to eat. The kids sometimes stole food from the food store and picked some vegetables from the garden. If they were caught they got a whipping. When she grew up she wasn't allowed to sleep with her mother or to play with her old friends. She was "never allowed to have any" butter or milk kept in the "old cooler." Since she was not allowed to have any she would "sneak into the cooler and pinch some butter" (M P 410).

When Nan was fifteen she was permanently taken away from her mother giving a wrong notion that she had been given education. She was the white man Drake-Brokeman's daughter and of the contemporary of his other white daughters. She sadly remembered, "I was only a kid myself … but I had to do the work" (M P 412). Thus her right to get education was denied and she remained as an illiterate all along her life. Blacks were ill-treated and considered as Nan revealed: "'Cause you're black, they treat you like dirt … we was owned, like a cow or a horse. I even heard some people say we not the same as whites. That's not true, we all God's children" (M P 415). The white men took sexual advantage over the black woman and if they got children they "weren't allowed to keep them." They were allowed to keep the black ones. The white skinned children were taken off and the black mothers "weren't considered fit to raise a child with white blood" (M P 415). The native servants had no security. They were forced and misused and had kids to the white men. They received a worse treatment in this country. The white men beat the native kids to teach them not to steal whereas they didn't touch the white kids even though they did worse than that.

Nan was denied the right to express the name of Gladys' father. After child-birth Daisy "had too much work to do" and was not allowed to attend her own child. When Gladys was about three years old she was separated from Nan and put in Parkerville Children's Home. She was not given a chance to express her feelings as she says:

> What could I do? I was too frightened to say anythin'. I wanted to keep her with me, she was all I had, but they didn't want her there.... Aren't black people

> allowed to have feelin's? .... I ran down to the wild bamboo near the river and cried and cried. How can a mother lose a child like that? ... I thought of my poor mother then, they took her Arthur from her, and then they took me. (M P 420)

Nan was tormented with the constant craving for knowledge, the knowledge of her daughter - how she is getting on. This craving was never satisfied. She never knew. Gladys's and Nan's experiences grew into great fear, fear of reliving the painful experience and fear of remembering. Being an Aboriginal was too painful to carry on. It was a knowledge and experience that was too hurtful even to mention. It was the pain that lead Gladys and Nan to try to assimilate Sally and her siblings into a culture, and identity that was not their own: Indian. It was an identity that was much better than knowing that one is an Aboriginal. Anything other than being an Aboriginal was better, less painful and less hurtful. Both Daisy and her daughter were disowned by their father. Daisy was treated as a servant even within her father's house.

In *April Raintree*, April's reminiscences fictionalize their forceful and tragic separation from their parents, Henry Raintree of mixed blood Indian and Alice Raintree of part Irish and part Ojibway. Their Norway house is transformed into a microcosm of Canadian Metis life. The tragically separated minds of April and Cheryl are enveloped with the memories of their parents and the miseries of present life. April reflects it in the following words: "Most of my misery, however, was caused by the separation from my parents" (A R 10). Amidst all the cruel deeds April realizes the tragedy of being a Metis: "Being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people" (A R 34). This realization forces April to reject her identity. She decides: "Well, I wasn't going to live like a half-breed. When I got free of this place, when I got free from being a foster child, then I would live just like a real white person" (A R 34). She despises anything to do with Indians.

Unlike April, Cheryl feels proud of being a Metis. She tells April: "we should be proud of our heritage. You know what that means? It means we're part-Indian and part-white. I wish we were whole Indians" (A R 30). Cheryl rebels against the falsehood charged against on the Native Indians in her history class. She loudly protests saying "this is bunch of lies!" Her history teacher's rapid assertion: "They are not lies; this is history. These things happened whether you like it or not," provokes Cheryl as she asks:

> If this is history, how come so many Indian tribes were wiped out? How come they haven't got their land anymore? How come their food supplies were wiped out? Lies! Lies! Lies! Your history books don't say how the white people destroyed the Indian way of life. That's all you white people can do is teach a bunch of lies to cover your own tracks! (A R 40-41)

Cheryl, an ardent follower of Luis Reil, a Native rebel, bears a striking resemblance to Joan of Arc who faces punishment for being right and telling the truth. April Raintree marries Bob, a white man in order to shed her Metis identity. April's overhearing of Mother Radcliff and Heather's conversation over her Metis identity and her proposed divorce from Bob force her to reinstate her former identity. Her process of locating her identity becomes inconsistent while she happens to face the rapists. She is mistaken for Cheryl as a Native person. April's fantasy of her fake white identity is demolished after this moral ordeal. Cheryl dismantles the fabricated system of assimilation while April, the narrator protagonist attempts in her life to bring out the identity crisis. April-Cheryl's struggle with identity can be read as a quest for true self.

April's story is sloughing off false personal (only at the end does April realize her mistake of trying to become a white person) and final embracing of an authentic self. Her identity undergoes a transparency. April at the end determines to embrace her real heritage. In Julia Emberley's words:

> The ending marks a reclaiming of "identity" over difference…a new synthesis of the split narratives of subjectivity constituted in Cheryl and April…a new order of unification and reconciliation in which the 'Indiannes`s' of Cheryl is absorbed into the whiteness of April. (162)

A clash between identities arises as Culleton describes her personal story. The conflict is happily resolved when the pseudo (White) identity is jettisoned to pave way for the assertion of the Native identity. The novel thus attempts to present the cruelty of the Native life. To describe their reality, Culleton mixes family, ancestry, history with fictional mode, and autobiographical discourse with the genre of realism. She rehistoricizes the personal as well as the cultural identity.

While narrating his story, Arthur in *My Place* recalls how he was separated from his family: "I cried and cried, calling to my mother, 'I don't want to go!' she was my favourite. I loved her. I called, 'I want to stop with you, I want to stop with you!' I never saw her again" (M P 231-232). He is considered "a white blackfella"(M P 228). Black children in the home are not treated as kids rather called "inmates, just like a prison" (M P 232). Having received inhuman treatment there, Arthur decides to run away from there. After leaving the home he has to do odd jobs for getting food. He has not been given the wages for his hard work and has suffered without proper shelter during winter. He has become a farmer and involved in sharefarming and saved all money. Having known as a hard worker and earned a farm of his own he thought, "I must have been somethin' out of the ordinary, to be a black man ahead of everybody else" (M P 262). Though he was denied the right to posses his land and get wages for his work, he slowly finds his own way through his determined self that accepts the aboriginal reality. He is fortunate enough to reunite with his younger sister, Daisy.

In spite of the denial of rights the Aborigines find means to withstand the circumstances through the process of self-determination. This process takes control of their future and decides how they will address the issues facing them. Sally in *My Place* determines to undertake a quest for her roots and decides to recreate their family history. Realising the need to write private and communal histories independent of European ones, Sally Morgan has written *My Place*. She reveals her aim of attempting this text as she explains things to Arthur, her grandmother's brother:

> I want to write the history of my own family …there's 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 for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything.… There are all sorts of files about aboriginals that we go back, and the government won't release them.… I mean our government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the policy of taking children away. None of that happened to White people.… I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story. (M P 208)

In her self-writing process she narrates the facts of not only her experiences but also the collective experiences of her community masked in a fictional vein. Orature and memory vitalise her narration and she fictionalises the facts of her real experiences.

Sally's words thus reveal her determination to express the injustices done to the Aborigines even though they are entitled to all the rights of protection afforded by British Law. Her determination to recreate the past not only moves Arthur but also empowers him to assert his identity and he comes forward first to reveal his story without giving any suggestion for the young for "each man has to find his own way" (M P 266). He expresses the collective wish of the Aborigines that, "they just want to live their life free, they don't need white man's law" (M P 266). His recognition of himself as a child of God helps him endure with the hardships and he tells Sally to have strong faith in "God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit" (M P 267) and he assures that God is the only good friend. He even criticizes the way the white twist the religious Commandment.

Arthur has wound up his story with a sense of satisfaction and he wishes the readers to understand "how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants" (M P 268). He thus expresses the yearning of every Aborigine for recognition of their values, culture and traditions so that they can co-exist with those of the mainstream society. It requires respecting their difference and celebrating it within the diversity of the nation. Without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.

Arthur's story and his spirit of endurance encourage Sally to undertake a journey with her family to her grandmother's birthplace, Corunna Downs. This helps her realise and recognise her purpose: "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're proud of it" (M P 294). This aboriginal consciousness is displayed through a fiction of her own creation. John McLeod puts it:

> in constructing an 'Aboriginal consciousness' and laying a claim to it, Sally Morgan could be criticised for fictionalising a form ofessentialised, sovereign subjectivity which homogenises all aboriginals and papers over the important historical and cultural specifics of Sally's position. (202)

Sally transcribes this "Aboriginal consciousness" into the creative rendering *My Place*. Her acknowledgement of her Aboriginal past enables even her mother and her grandmother to reveal their past and "to build affiliations with Aboriginal peoples and involves herself in bringing their lives to bear upon Australian history" (McLeod 203).

The authentic firsthand experiences of the two authors, Beatrice Culleton and Sally Morgan become a rich and reliable resource material for their writing. Therefore both the novels serve to provide the Native readers with a recognizable reality. Memory plays a pivotal role in both the novelists' life in describing their personal story, family history, and nostalgia. The genre of native autobiography emphasises the importance of ancestry, memory, aboriginal history and family stories. Both the novelists express their longing to regain their unpolluted land. Before the arrival of the white, black people had enjoyed a co-existence of all life. In *My Place*, representing the aboriginal urge Arthur says that they "want their own land, with no white man messin' about destroyin' it" (230). As a champion of Aboriginal cause Cheryl in *April Raintree* mourns for the loss of the Native lands and freedom in the following lines:

> ...we are here for centuries. We kept the land, the waters, the air, clean andpure, for our children and for our children'schildren.
>
> Now that you are here, White Man, the rivers bleed withcontamination. The winds moan with the heavy weight of pollution in the air.

The land vomits up poisons which have fed into it.

Our Mother Earth is no longer clean and healthy. She is dying....

... we the Indian people, we are still dying. The land we lost is dying, too. (136)

In both the novels, Education plays a significant role in the lives of the central characters to empower them. Sally in *My Place* undertakes the quest for identity as she was questioned by the fellow students about her origin. Her higher education empowers her to search for it with determination and fortitude. Her determination moves Arthur to reveal his story and leads her to persuade her quest further to achieve her end. She in turn empowers the elder women, her mother and her grandmother to shed off the fear of insecurity and helps them assert their Aboriginal identity. It is the story of three Aboriginal women, Sally, Glad, and Nan, who found their futures and their pasts. It is the story of them finding their Aboriginal heritages, or returning to their Aboriginal heritages. They fondly and without any feeling of shame embrace their identity as they accept to live with their reality.

Likewise the central characters in *April Raintree* are more fortunate to have education during their stay at different foster homes and are empowered to champion the cause of the Metis. Empowered Cheryl seems to be a rebel as she makes speeches and writes articles on the issues of the Aboriginal deprivation during her university days and later she chooses to join Friend's Centre to work for the welfare of the Metis. Eventually, she becomes a failure as she finds her inability to change the condition of the deprived Metis and lives her later life as an addict to alcoholism. Her tragic death and commitment towards the suffering Metis community persuade April, her sister to reclaim her Metis identity. In the last part of the novel, April realizes: "It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl's death to bring me to accept my identity" (184). April emerges as an empowered woman determines to work for her people's future. Through the two sisters Beatrice Culleton illustrates the difficulties which many Native people face in maintaining a positive self-identity.

Unlike the characters in *April Raintree*, the elder women in *My Place* device a few other measures to overcome their deprived and dispossessed situation as they develop a communion with nature and Aboriginal music which is more of spiritual bond than physical. Their souls develop a close connection with the Greater Soul too. This astute spiritual strength sustains them during the traumatic experiences. In their later life both the novelists work for the welfare of their community. In this way the two novels when read together afford an excellent understanding of lands, people, cultures and predicaments. Besides a few dissimilarities, the novelists share their memories that are similar in revealing their past and the difficulties in reclaiming their Aboriginal identities.

One of the characteristic features of any ethnic autobiography is to fuse memory, ancestry and personal history. Both Beatrice Culleton and Sally Morgan link memory in their narratives. H.L Grates Jr. writes of the memory of the Blacks: "It was memory above all else that gave a shape...the slave had no past beyond memory; the slave had lived at no time past the point of recollection" (101). This is true that both Beatrice Culleton and Sally Morgan rely more on memory and use it extensively to trace their development as Native/Aboriginal writers and artists from their childhood. Memory links them to the Aboriginal communities and their present to the past. Both the writers weave their life narratives by reviving their past cultural heritage, rediscovering their identities and their roots and hold high the rich and matchless primitive knowledge, beliefs and their affinity with nature.

**WORKS CITED**

Culleton, Beatrice. *April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1984. Print.

Emberly, Julia V. "Thresholds of Difference." *Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings Postcolonial Theory*.Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993. Print.

Grates Jr., Henry Louis. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the Racial Self*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. Print.

Mitra, Reena. "Autobiography as a Strategy of Resistance and Empowerment: Sally Morgan's *My Place." Critical Responses to Literatures in English*. By Reena Mitra. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005. Print. 146-156.

Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987. New Delhi: Indialog Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2001. Print.

Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada from the Oral Tradition to the Present.* Toronto: OUP, 1990. Print.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. Print.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. Print.

**Dr. Judith Sophia Lawrence PhD.,**
**Assistant Professor of English,**
**Scott Christian College (Autonomous),**
**Nagercoil,**
**Tamil Nadu, India.**