Research Ethics: Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
Vol. 1, Issue 1, March-April 2023
www.researchethics.in

Negotiating Aboriginality: A Study of the Representation of Aboriginal Humour in Sally Morgan's *My Place*

Dr Payel Paul

Assistant Professor of English, Kulti College, Kulti, Paschim Bardhaman, West Bengal, India,
Email: itspayel@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper proposes to find out how Aboriginal humour has been used by Australian Aboriginal women writers in their life writings for the articulation of Aboriginality. It is a well-known fact that the Aboriginal people of Australia have laughed their way through their struggles. Their sense of humour and their capability to laugh have worked in their favour as a strategy in not only making their trauma and pain bearable but also in helping them resist the dominant white society's efforts to undermine their culture and assimilate them into whiteness. This paper will highlight the representation of the distinctive features of Australian Aboriginal humour in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, Jackie and Rita Huggins' *Auntie Rita* and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* so as to examine how such representations become instrumental in the redefinition and assertion of Aboriginality, especially in the context of the efforts made by colonial discursive practices to construct and represent 'Aboriginality' for more than two centuries.

Key Words: Aboriginality, Australian Aboriginal humour, survival mechanism, assimilation, white domination

Aboriginality is probably the most nebulous and contested term in Australian Aboriginal studies. In the words of Michael Dodson, "even ... to speak about Aboriginality is to enter a labyrinth full of obscure passages, ambiguous signs and trapdoors" (28). The most debatable factor that informs the problem of defining Aboriginality is a political one – it is the fact that the term *Aborigine* was bestowed on the native peoples of Australia by the Europeans, and for years, they were the European colonisers who have been defining and determining the factors that make a person Aboriginal. The unproblematised use of the term *Aboriginality* threatens to subsume all those different variations and versions of Aboriginality under one universalising banner of sameness. But on the other hand, Aboriginality or rather pan-Aboriginality is a necessary concept as far as Aboriginal political action is concerned. In the words of Robert Ariss, such a concept is necessary "for Aborigines to present a united, and therefore more efficacious front to a government reluctant to recognise their demands" (136). This complicates the issue even further, as on the one hand, the Aborigines see the construction of the notion of

Aboriginality as a means adopted by white Australia to marginalise them, on the other, they use the exhaustive quality of the term *Aboriginality* to "describe Aboriginal people's united identity," the one that brings together all the Aborigines under an umbrella term to fight for a common cause (Brewster 3).

Social scientists and white anthropologists working in this field have played a crucial role down the years in constructing the notion of Aboriginality and subsequently influencing government policies dealing with the Aborigines. Colin Tatz in his essay, "Aboriginality as Civilization" (1980), disapproves of the authority that white anthropology exercises in assessing and ascertaining an Aborigine's identity. He states:

> For Aborigines the ultimate indignity is the sovereignty of those who control the gathering and dissemination of the written and spoken word concerning their situation. Libraries of material – often of great value and scholarship – have helped create, or re-create, a pristine, pure, before-the-white-man-came-and-buggered-everything ideal, idealised type. THAT, says the academic orthodoxy, is Aboriginality: any deviation therefrom gives white society licence to deny people that which they are and believe themselves to be. (356)

According to Tatz, the work of white anthropologists has contributed to the formation of stereotypical images of the Aborigines whereby the definitions formulated by them have tended to admit only the traditional ones in their purview, leaving the half-castes and semi-urban baffled in their search to establish their Aboriginal identity with which they have lived all their lives. Echoing the oft-quoted description of Jeremy Beckett, Tatz points out that white anthropological and ethnocentric scholarship has "provided a mental straitjacket for whites and blacks: a physical prototype, head-banded, bearded, loin-clothed, sometimes ochred, one foot up, a clutch of spears, ready to hunt or exhibiting eternal, mystical vigilance" (356). Tatz wonders at the highhandedness of this academic body which wields power enough to dismiss a person's Aboriginal identity if he does not exhibit those features which white anthropological studies have designated as belonging to the real Aborigine. Addressing the much-debated question, 'Who is the real Aborigine?' Tatz points out that such is the "hegemony of white knowledge and white dissemination of all things Aboriginal, that those perceptions have been enshrined" in the "most positive piece of legislation in Aboriginal history: the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976*," an act that "embodies and realises anthropological orthodoxies" by making it imperative on the part of the claimant to prove his Aboriginality in terms of his descent, spirituality and attachment with the land (356). Right from the initial days of contact till very recently subsequent Australian governments had formulated various means to arrive at the perfect definition of the Australian Aborigine. However, irrespective of the ways in which they were defined by the white legal system, the Aborigines have been living and performing their Aboriginality on a daily basis, though they might not officially qualify to be the real Aborigines. In the words of Tatz, "Aborigines across Australia live in a cultural environment

of Aboriginality ... It may be articulated within or it may be so much part and parcel of their lives that it needs no special articulation" (359).

Aborigines across Australia are unique in their sense of belonging to their tribal land which gives meaning to their Dreamtime myths and thus, their cultural and spiritual life. The identity of an Australian Aborigine is drawn from his land and the Dreaming myths associated with it. Thus, Vincent Lingiari asserts, "My people are Gurindji, who live in Wave Hill area. That me countr" (qtd. in Martinez 141). The anthropologist, Diane Barwick, explains what Aboriginality means to the majority of Australian Aborigines:

> To be Aboriginal, in their own view, is to be loyal to, the small closed communities of kin and friends who are fellow kooris, scattered enclaves on a world of whites. ... For Aborigines the basic subcultural ties are those of locality and family. ... Its members share a strong attachment to the land, to the 'home place' or region surrounding the Aboriginal reserves where their forebears lived, worked and lie buried. (27)

Such allegiance to one's community and identification with one's own tribal land makes the conception of pan-Aboriginality problematic. However, during the 1960s and 70s, the period of heightened Aboriginal political activism, several measures were taken that took on the symbol of pan-Aboriginal identity. The setting up of the Tent Embassy, for example, brought together Aborigines from all over the country, and the hoisting of the Aboriginal flag became a "new cultural artefact that symbolised unity against white society" (Stokes 166). Charles Perkins, Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, remarked in an interview in 1983, "Aborigines are starting to realise right throughout Australia that there's a thing that's binding them together: that's the psychology of being an Aboriginal, that's culture, that's blood-line, everything" (qtd. in Shoemaker 232). Alongside the evolving notions of pan-Aboriginality, there always remains the land-based regional Aboriginalities which contend with each other with their different political agendas. The different socio-political and cultural ways in which the Aborigines identify themselves only reiterate the point that "Aboriginality is necessarily subjective" and that "it makes as much sense to speak of 'Aboriginal histories' as of 'Aboriginal history,' and 'Aboriginalities' as of 'Aboriginality'" (Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* 150). However, though the construction of Aboriginality is contested within the Aboriginal communities, it has been crucial not only in shaping Aboriginal political thought and action but also in challenging the stereotypical constructs propagated by white colonial discourses. Through a process termed by Bain Attwood as *Aboriginalism* the European colonisers have "produce[d] authoritative and essentialist 'truths' about indigenes" (i). European power and knowledge have worked together to construct the Aborigines "in their absence," in binary opposition to the Europeans (Attwood, *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines* ii). They stood for everything which the Europeans were not. Whereas the Europeans represented culture, civilisation and progress, the Aborigines were constructed as savages, stone-age people, the primordial or primitive other. They were turned into objects of knowledge, so much so that the Aborigines had lost control over their own identity. Geoffrey

Stokes notes that "European ideologies of Aboriginal identity become myths, believed by both whites and Aborigines and become institutionalised in laws, programs of protection, segregation and education, they continue to be powerful instruments of domination" (159). The Europeans determined the characteristics of Aboriginality and the Aborigines were called upon to fulfil those characteristics in order to substantiate their claims as to being Australian Aborigines.

Since the 1960s, the Aborigines have engaged themselves in defining their identity and reclaiming their forgotten history. Writers and activists like Jackie Huggins have expressed their indignation at the fact that non-Aboriginal Australians have exercised their authority in defining who the Aborigines are:

> Foremostly I detest the imposition that anyone who is non-Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race. Neither do I accept any definition of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginals, as it insults my intelligence, spirit and soul and negates my heritage. ... There are no books written by non-Aboriginals that can tell me what it is to be Black as it is a fiction and ethnocentric presumption to do so. (Huggins 60)

Thus, the Aboriginality forged by the Aborigines themselves as part of their political activism is "counter-cultural in European terms," intended to defy the white man's presumption that he knows everything about the Aborigines (Shoemaker 232). Since the 1960s Aboriginal activists have been spurning stereotypical constructions of Aboriginality, reclaiming their authority to redefine Aboriginality and to talk about their own issues. However, the process of recovery and reconstruction of Aboriginality has worked on two levels – as the unified identity of the Australian Aborigine has got forged, accommodations were also made for "the diverse Aboriginal identities associated with place or region" (Stokes 170).

Adam Shoemaker in *Black Words White Page* (1989) has observed that the "definition of Aboriginality," includes a whole "range of experience[s]" (232). It has "many facets: endurance, pride, protest, poverty, sorrow, anger and humour" (Shoemaker 234). According to Shoemaker, all the experiences that an Australian Aborigine has in his life, his endurance of oppression, pride in his culture and his self, protest against injustice, poverty and deprivation, pain, anger against his oppressors and lastly humour to survive his predicament, go into the constitution of his Aboriginality. Aboriginality cannot be straitjacketed or pinned into fixed categories. It will always constitute much more than will be possible for one to formulate in a definition. Shoemaker states that for many Aborigines, Aboriginality is a "positive state of mind" that includes "respect for the Aboriginal past and for traditional Black Australian ties to the land, a sense of pride and dignity, and sometimes one of dismay and outrage" (231-33). While studying expressions of Aboriginality in Black Australian drama, Shoemaker has highlighted not the shared experience of oppression, but rather the shared experience of enjoyment of life, as a distinctive feature of Aboriginality. The Aborigines have a distinct "sense of humour which acts to combat depression and to promote the cohesion of the Black

Australian group," and this "reliance upon laughter in the midst of adversity," according to Shoemaker, "is an important element in the Aboriginal self-image" (Shoemaker 232). This humour is mostly derived from their observation of people and their manners. Aborigines are good actors and mimics, and as W. E. H. Stanner has pointed out, "they know people's walks and mannerisms" and remember them longer than white people (qtd. in Shoemaker 234). Thus, according to Shoemaker, Aboriginality does not only constitute feelings of privation but also constitutes a distinct sense of humour that helps the Aborigines to assert "their own independence and capacity for endurance" (Shoemaker 233).

The fact that humour is a part and parcel of the lives of Australian Aborigines is reflected in the life writings of Aboriginal women. A close reading of the narratives reveals not only the characters' innate sense of humour but also their strategic use of humour on a day-to-day basis to make the oppression inflicted by the white society bearable and to resist white domination. The narrative of *My Place* has multiple examples of the typical humour possessed and practised by the Australian Aborigines. In the opening chapter of the book, Morgan compares her own "long and skinny" limbs with those of the monkey: "Could I get by with only one of my monkey legs or arms? That's what I called them" (12). This habit of drawing parallels between human beings and other creatures and things continues as she grows up. When Sally goes to visit her father at the hospital and finds him in a loose dressing gown, she says, "His dressing-gown hung so loosely around his lanky body that he reminded me of the wire coat-hangers Mum had hanging in the hall cupboard" (12). Towards the end of the narrative when her grandmother, Daisy, after being assaulted by the doctors at the hospital, comes back home and sits quietly staring at the floor, Sally is reminded of "one of our old dogs just after he'd been hurt" (313). Even in grave situations, Morgan cannot stop herself from drawing funny comparisons because it is so ineradicably grafted in her Aboriginal self. Such analogies remind us of what John Newfang has said about Aboriginal humour being "one of familiarity" and that "it equates people with other people, people with animals and what have you" (qtd. in Shoemaker 234). We already know that Aborigines are good observers of men and manners, and such comparisons are evidence of a distinct trait of Aboriginal humour arising out of a close observation of people's appearances including one's own.

Brewster points out that in Morgan's text "more often than not the joke is at a family member's expense" (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 22). From the very beginning of the narrative, we come to know about Sally's passion for painting since her childhood. One day in her first year at school, the class teacher asks all the students to draw a beautiful picture of their parents, mentioning that the best ones will be put up for display on Parents' Night. Sally is obviously very excited as she thinks hers would be "one of the chosen few" (19). She puts an arm over her work to stop others from copying and goes on "crayoning and detailing" her parents (19). When her class teacher comes by her side and asks her to show her drawing, the teacher is literally taken aback by what Sally has drawn:

> 'Ooh, goodness me!' she muttered as she patted her heart. ... Before I could stop her, she picked up my page and walked quickly to her desk. I watched in dismay as my big-bosomed, large-nippled mother and well equipped father disappeared with a scrunch into her personal bin. I was hurt and embarrassed, the children around me snickered. It hadn't occurred to me you were meant to draw them with clothes on. (19)

What Sally draws confidently turns out to be a caricature of her Mum and Dad. She draws a picture of her parents but forgets their clothes. The comicality of the scene ensues from the perception of the incongruity between what was expected from Sally and what she actually did. Like this incident, there are many instances strewn throughout the text where we find Sally taking immense pleasure in poking fun at her mother, grandmother and other members of her family.

What Stanner calls a "pawky vein of wit" is found in Morgan, especially in her dealing with the family members (42). She makes fun of her grandmother, Daisy's weakening eyesight with advancing age, and mentions how Daisy at times used to "feed Curly at the wrong end" (312). Sally states that her father did not seem at all to take any interest in her school or her studies. However, the "closest contact" he had with her "education was a brutal encounter with [her] black pencil" (19). Sally was sitting on the lounge sharpening her pencil when her father came and "bent down to sit on the arm of [her] chair" (20). Just then, Morgan relates:

> Without thinking, I stood my pencil pointy-end upwards and watched as blue buttocks descend. On contact, Dad leapt up in pain and swore loudly. As he swung around, I waited for him to belt me. To my utter surprise, all he could manage to do was splutter, 'Go to your room!' (20)

In an interview taken by Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, Sally Morgan states:

> People have often criticised me for my sarcastic sense of humour and when I started going up north all of a sudden I realised where I got it from. Because it suddenly hit me that that's where my sense of humour belonged, it belonged in that context and everyone had the same sense of humour; (qtd. in Bird and Haskell 16-17)

By "people up north" Morgan means her mob, the Aboriginal community that had once been the chief labour force on the Corunna Downs Station in the Pilbara region of northern Western Australia. From her remark, it is clear that Morgan's sarcastic sense of humour which is often directed at her own family members is a trait which she has inherited from her Aboriginal ancestors.

Morgan like other members of her community had an aversion to and a fear of authority. She hated visiting the hospital and later her school, both institutions where power was wielded by

white authorities. On her first day at school, she thought that "it was a place dedicated to taking the spirit out of life" (17). However, the white power and authority that the school represents get subverted when Morgan describes the way she had looked at Miss Glazberg, her class teacher, for the first time:

> 'May I have your attention please?' she said loudly. Everyone immediately stopped talking. ... From my vantage point on the bottom step, I peered up slowly at her long, thick legs and under her full skirt. Mum tapped me slowly on the shoulder and made me turn around. She thought I was curious about far too many things. (18)

This ludicrous view of an authoritarian figure who represents the white education system, robs the system of the awe that it is supposed to inspire amongst the ones whom the Western civilisation had been considering intellectually backward for a long time. Brewster remarks in this context that in Morgan's narrative, the "butt of many jokes is a source of authority, be it the school, religion or a formal occasion" (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 22). When Sally's mother started the job as a cleaner at her school, Sally often helped her mother, and she says she liked cleaning the boards most because it would give her the opportunity to "scrawl rude comments about school across the whole length of the wall" – "It gave me great sense of power" (68). This is how she flouted the white education system and made a mockery of the power it wielded. It should not be forgotten in this context that from the early days of colonial encroachment upon Aboriginal societies, missionaries have been tearing children away from their mothers' lap to get them educated and trained in the culture of western civilisation. When the necessity of education was explained before the mothers and tribal elders, they could not relate to it, nor did they find its utility in their hunting and gathering lives enriched by the Dreaming myths. The missions, schools, homes and dormitories were places where the Aborigines were placed to make them forget their own culture and embrace the culture of the European invaders.

As far as religion is concerned, we find a similar mockery of religious authority in Morgan's narrative. Brewster notes that "the seriousness of conventional religion didn't impress Sally much as a child" (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 22). Sally speaks very humorously of her mother not being "biased when it came to religion" – "We attended the Roman Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, Church of Christ and Seventh Day Adventist churches" (62). Daisy like the other members of her family was not at all impressed by the seriousness of institutionalised Christianity. She entertained the ladies from the Jehovah's Witness Church, allowed them to sell her the *Watchtower* and other leaflets, and at the same time, "chuckle[d] wickedly" and remarked to Sally, "They think I want to become a Jehovah's Witness, Sally" (108). She gave them the impression that she was a devout Christian, but her purpose behind entertaining them was actually different. She confided to Sally that she was collecting those soft papers as they would "make the most marvellous toilet paper" (108). This is an instance of what Shoemaker calls, the "Humour of 'sacrilege," as it involves mockery and flouting of

the white man's religion (244). The pragmatic use of those religious papers became so appealing to Daisy and her daughter, that Morgan mockingly says, "Before very long, they were both avid collectoholics" (108). These instances manifest the ineffectiveness of the endeavours of the Christian missionaries on the Aboriginal mind. It also proves that though the Christian missionaries had done their best to dislocate the Aborigines from their traditional religious and cultural base, it was not a thoroughly successful endeavour. Morgan's family's defiance of white authority and white mores is also evident in their refusal to keep their house clean and tidy. Every rent day Daisy would go about cleaning the house in order to impress the rent man. But then again, one day, Morgan relates, the rent man had become very pleased with the tea and the delicious biscuits that Daisy had served him, so much so that he wanted to know the name of the biscuit brand. But having come to look for the packet Daisy finds out to her utter dismay that it was dog food that she had served the rent man. Thus, what begins as appeasement ends as a mockery of white authority.

Teasing and self-disparagement are also forms of humour practised by the members of the Aboriginal communities to arm themselves against the racial discrimination they face in the white-dominated society outside. Self-disparaging humour is a way of dealing with the negative stereotypes in which the Aborigines are cast. This form of humour becomes evident in Morgan's text when Morgan's granduncle, Arthur, visits Daisy and they start calling each other "blackfella" (147). Such playful teasing can be explained as two elderly Aborigines reminding each other of their skin colour after having spent their lives with the knowledge of what it means to be black in Australia. It also reflects the way the assimilation process had taught them to be ashamed of their complexion while knowing all the while that it is something they cannot escape from. Arthur like Sally is also capable of witty and at times sarcastic remarks. While talking about their mob at Corunna Downs Station, he relates how the Aboriginal woman Tiger Minnie had given birth to a "nearly white" baby whom he calls a "white blackfella" – white in the skin, black in the soul (179). Morgan remarks, "Arthur was like Mum, it wasn't often he failed to see the funny side of things" (158). It was his sense of humour and his ability to remain unaffected by white oppression that enabled him to survive and fight his own battle with the hostile world around him. Dennis Haskell describes Arthur as the "blithe one" (Bird and Haskell 18). Arthur talks about the injustices that were meted out to him by his white employers in a very casual and detached tone. When Morgan was asked about this attitude, she generalised this feature as common among a lot of the elderly Aborigines – "They all talk like that ... they are all very blithe and very off-the-cuff about their experiences ... That humour is a survival technique that a lot of people use up there" (qtd. in Bird and Haskell 18). Humour for the Aborigines is their survival mechanism, and it explains Arthur's nonchalant attitude to life. This facet of humour is found in Gladys, Morgan's mother, and Daisy, Morgan's grandmother, as well.

The most distinguishing aspect of Gladys's character is her ability to laugh in all situations, especially the tougher ones. Morgan says about her mother that "Mum [always] saw the funny side of things" (46). Early in the narrative Morgan talks about their ride at the back of her

father's old 1948 Ford van. The van had no back doors, "just a big open back" and the roof was "padded with kapok" (32). In winter when it rained, the kapok soaked in rain, and "lumps of soggy kapok" fell on the laps of the children sitting at the back:

> While we shouted our complaints from the back, Mum sat, dry as a bone, in the cab, giggling away. She'd confided to me once that she'd learned to laugh over difficult situations early in life, but I found this philosophy no comfort when it came to smelly, wet kapok. (32)

Gladys like all Aborigines across Australia had "learnt to laugh over difficult situations" (32). As for Gladys having learnt it early in life, it can be said that it is obvious as her hardships had begun when she was three years old. At three she was separated from her mother Daisy who was a domestic servant of the Drake-Brockman family, and was sent to Parkerville Children's Home. At Home, she utterly missed motherly love and care, good food and the warmth of home and hearth. Most of the time, she cried herself to sleep at night. Daisy has time and again repeated in the text that life was not easy for the Aborigines in Australia – "You don't know what it's like for people like us. We're like those Jews, we got to look out for ourselves" (105). In such circumstances, humour is what had kept Gladys and others alive in the country, as "Laughter is a means of relieving tension and stress, of coping with difficulty and anger" (Brewster, *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* 22).

Morgan's grandmother, Daisy Corunna, was a funny woman too who "loved a practical joke" and would "like getting a reaction" (Bird and Haskell 17). She had suffered at the hands of white authority, was removed from her mother when she was fourteen, had to work very hard and was sexually exploited at the house of her white employers, and later her daughter was taken away from her. As a result, she had her secrets and relentlessly refused to let them on. She was very protective of her family and perpetually suspicious of government officials and their motives. However, like a true Aborigine, she had lost neither her sense of humour amid her sufferings, nor her ability to laugh and induce laughter. She was a stubborn lady, unbendable about the notions she thought were correct, and was also someone who took pleasure in irritating her near ones by repeatedly enforcing upon them her traditional beliefs. When the children were small, she was always concerned about getting their bowels cleared. Anyone spending more than usual time in the toilet would cause her to worry. If Gladys stayed "longer than ten minutes" in the toilet, she "manifested her concern by knocking on the toilet door and calling, "Glad ... are you in there?" (65). Then her daughter would angrily retort, "Of course I am, you stupid old woman," and then some angry exchange of words would follow and finally Daisy would clinch the topic by repeating, "Glad ... are you still in there?" (65). The funniest point would come when Gladys would get furious, and violently flush the toilet and emerge "ready to berate" her mother only to find her already gone (65). Daisy, who had a perfect "sense of timing," would walk quickly to her room and lock herself in as soon as she heard "the chain being pulled" (65).

Like the other members of her family, Daisy too could laugh at her own expense. When it was pointed out to her that the front of her hair had turned "nicotine yellow" due to chain-smoking, while the rest was "light grey," she chuckled and replied, "It's better than hair dye ... now if only I could get it to go round the back as well" (70). Then again in her attempt to impress the rent man and pass off as white, Daisy told the rent man, "Look at that black crow ... and all those maggies, God made them too. ... and here are you and I, both white, and we couldn't do that" (107). The confidence with which Daisy poses to be white and glorifies God without believing a single word she utters serves a dual purpose – by pretending to be white, she gives a false impression to the rent man that she has internalised white religion and culture, and secondly, by posing to be an ideal Christian, she flouts the white man's religion and exposes its failure to make a serious impression on the minds of Aborigines like her.

It is important to note that amidst her story of hardship and deprivation, Daisy does not miss a single opportunity to laugh. Laughter was always a part and parcel of her life since childhood, so much so that the cook at Corunna Downs called her and her friend Queenie "giggling gerties" – they would "laugh and giggle at anything" (Morgan 329). Like Arthur and Gladys, Daisy also could find mirth amidst her sufferings. It is her ability to accept her situation, deal with her difficulties in a light-hearted detached manner and look for every occasion to poke fun that constitutes her distinctly Aboriginal self. Muecke observes that in *My Place*:

> … there is a good deal of weeping and laughing: having a good laugh or having a good cry. There is no attempt to present a measured or controlled account of this subjective process. Reason or understanding is not particularly valued, rather a lack of 'understanding' is presented in an attempt to defamiliarize white customs and amuse the reader. (414)

According to Muecke, rationality belongs to the domain of the white West, and therefore, a lack of it dominates Aboriginal humour. Thus, it takes very little to make Sally or Gladys or Daisy laugh. When asked by Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell whether the sense of humour "is the jokey way of your particular group," Morgan answers by pointing out that it is a facet "across the board".

> I've come across the use of humour as a survival mechanism all across Australia; no matter where you go people use it. It's a way of getting around the system or sending up the system or getting at the system by subverting it through humour. It's a very strong Aboriginal trait. (19)

However, it is an enigma that after what the Aborigines have been through, they still have the ability to take life easily. Morgan rationalises by saying that "they're the kind of people who don't want other people to pity them or feel sorry for them" (Bird and Haskell 19). Rather, Morgan thinks that "all the older people who had those experiences deal with them in that way – make jokes and they all say they had really sad times too" (Bird and Haskell 19). Laughter

in Aboriginal communities is also a means of bonding together. In storytelling sessions around the camp fire, the most popular stories are those that evoke the greatest laughter. The members of the community laugh together and feel bonded with each other as a close-knit family. Remembering the storytelling sessions Morgan remarks, "... the funniest story dominated the table" (74). Morgan's family members came together in the evenings and sat and laughed their hearts out. Morgan recalls, "I'll never forget those evenings, the open fire, Mum and Nan, all of us laughing and joking. I felt very secure, then. I knew it was us against the world" (53). Here, one is reminded of the words of Terry Eagleton that humour "is both bond and weapon" (139). The potential use of humour in increasing group cohesion is a vital aspect of Aboriginal humour.

Sally Morgan's sense of humour is distinctly Aboriginal in that she herself admits to her sarcastic humour having come from her Aboriginal relatives living in the Pilbara region of northern Western Australia. Like most Aborigines, she is a close observer of people's appearances and their attitudes, a quality which enables her to make striking yet hilarious comparisons between human beings and other animals and things. Her pawky vein of wit which can be observed throughout the narrative, and which does not even spare her family members, takes on one by one the education system, religious authority and white officialdom – all agents of white oppression over Aboriginal Australia. Through her hilarious interaction with and projection of these agents, she undercuts their presumptuous assumption of having Aboriginal lives under white control. Thus, humour becomes instrumental in her avowed task of restoring her people's lost pride in Aboriginality, and of telling white Australia what it takes to be an Aborigine. The humour that qualifies the characters of Morgan's other family members only helps to strengthen and add colour to the picture of Aboriginality which Morgan had ventured out to draw. Arthur and Gladys's sense of humour is very typical of the Aboriginal people of Australia. They are both blithe spirits whose secret of survival is to take life easily and see the sunny side of things. Deeply felt emotions are markedly absent in Arthur's narration of his life story. Incidents involving extreme physical and mental agony are related in a matter-of-fact tone. Arthur takes more pleasure in what he could achieve in the white man's world with his single-handed effort, than in remembering how he was torn, tortured and exploited by the white authorities. The most characteristic Aboriginal trait in Gladys' character is her ability to laugh all the time and in all situations. Gladys had encountered all the struggles that usually torment Australian Aboriginal lives – lack of financial security, drunken husbands, scanty chance of finding a footing in the white world and much more. Like all Aborigines, she fought her battles with laughter. Her mother Daisy was also a fighter. She could also keep up her funny side despite the lacerations she had borne throughout her life. Besides this, she too possessed like her granddaughter a sarcastic sense of humour which became glaringly evident in her dealings with the Jehovah's Sisters. This trait she had inherited directly from her Aboriginal mob up north and had passed on to Sally.

Drawing our attention to the "historicity of laughter," Ann Brewster has quoted Bakhtin refuting the proposition that "laughter is the same in every time and age" ("Gallows Humour

and Stereotyping" 236). In our discussion of the articulation of Aboriginality in the life-writings of Australian Aboriginal women, a consideration of the historicity of humour is necessary in order to assess the socio-political and historical relevance of humour so as to find out how it has been used in the reclamation and reconstruction of Aboriginality in the text. Morgan's life-writing deals with Aboriginal experiences from the 1950s to the 1980s. During this period, elderly Aboriginal women like Daisy Corunna were trying to recover from the devastating impact of the government assimilation policies. They were wary of white officials, but at the same time, had courage enough to flout white authority. Daisy's befooling the rent man and her using the leaflets sold by the ladies of Jehovah's Witness Church as toilet papers are cases in point. Members of the second and third generations of stolen Aborigines like Gladys and Sally were more defiant than their mothers, as they had started taking pride in their Aboriginal culture and identity, and did not receive well any slighting of their own culture. All those instances of Aboriginal humour mentioned in this chapter that undercut white authority, reflect, on the one hand, the way white Australia had dominated Aboriginal lives, and on the other, the way the Aborigines had tried to undermine that domination. Articulation of Aboriginality is evident in the use of humour as a part and parcel of Aboriginal life, as a survival mechanism, and as a means to mock white authority.

In our discussion of the role of humour in traditional Aboriginal communities, we have found that humour was an integral part of their socio-cultural life in that it was a part of their social interactions like the storytelling sessions around the fire, and also played a corrective role in the shaming and teasing acts. In urban and semi-urban Aboriginal societies, humour was a part of day-to-day life and conversation. It had become a weapon that empowered the Aborigines to resist the white society from taking full control of their lives, and it also became a coping mechanism that helped the Aborigines to endure oppression. The most distinct feature of Aboriginal humour that can be identified from a close reading of the Australian Aboriginal life writings is the ability of the Aborigines to see the funny side of things and to find food for laughter even in adverse situations. As resistance to white domination and sustenance of Aboriginal cultural tradition are involved in the use of Aboriginal humour, its representation in the life-writings of Aboriginal women entails an articulation of Aboriginality. In other words, it can be said that with the representation of the unique aspects of Australian Aboriginal humour, Australian Aboriginal women like Sally Morgan have successfully reclaimed and articulated the distinctive traits of their Aboriginality in their life writings.

Works Cited

Ariss, Robert. "Writing Black: The Construction of an Aboriginal Discourse." *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988, pp.131-146.

Attwood, Bain. Introduction. *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*. Ed. Bain Attwood and John Arnold. Bundoora: La Trobe University Press, 1992. pp. i-xvi.

---. *The Making of the Aborigines*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1989.

Barwick, Diane. "Aborigines of Victoria." *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*. Ed. Ian Keen. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994, pp 27-32.

Beckett, Jeremy. Introduction. *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988. 1-10.

---. "The Past in the Present; The Present in the Past: Constructing a National Aboriginality." *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Ed. Jeremy Beckett. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988, pp. 191-217.

Bird, Delys, and Dennis Haskell. "Interview with Sally Morgan." *Whose Place? A Study of Sally Morgan's My Place*. Ed. Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell. Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1992, pp. 47- 54.

Brewster, Anne. "Gallows Humour and Stereotyping in the Nyungar Writer Alf Taylor's Short Fiction: A White Cross-Racial Reading." *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*. Ed. Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014, pp. 233-254.

---. *Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography*. South Melbourne: Sydney University Press, 1996.

Dodson, Michael. "The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality." *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians.* Ed. Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003, pp. 25-42.

Eagleton, Terry. *Humour*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

Holt, Lilian. "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroboree." *Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour*. Ed. Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

Huggins, Rita, and Jackie Huggins. *Auntie Rita*. 1994. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005.

---. "Always Was Always Will Be." *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians.* Ed. Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003, pp. 60-65.

Martinez, Julia. "Problematising Aboriginal Nationalism." *Aboriginal History*. 21(1997): pp. 133-147.

Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987.

Muecke, Stephen. "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis." *Southerly*. 48.4(1988): pp. 405-418.

Shoemaker, Adam. *Black Words White Page*: *Aboriginal Literature: 1929-1988.* 1989. Melbourne: ANU E Press, 2004.

Stanner, W.E.H. "Aboriginal Humour." *Aboriginal History*. 6.1(1982): pp. 39-48.

Stokes, Geoffrey. "Citizenship and Aboriginality: Two Conceptions of Identity in Aboriginal Political Thought." *The Politics of Identity in Australia*. Ed Geoffrey Stokes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 158-174.

Tatz, Colin. "Aboriginality as Civilization." *The Australian Quarterly*. 52.3 (1980): pp. 352-362.