Ruby Langford provides a key to the contemporary Aboriginal situation when she says, "everything pertaining to us Abos has always been political, ever since Cook landed here" (Ginibi 1994: 42). Knowing that being born Aboriginal is being political, Aboriginal women's autobiographies become books of instruction for readers in decolonising history and articulating an Aboriginal version of it. The existing Aboriginal identity constructed by the whites gets blurred and an Aboriginal identity from an Aboriginal perspective is created in these autobiographies. Literature about Aborigines, for the first time, also becomes subjective here after being released from the clutches of "objective" presentation of Aborigines by the whites. Thus the political and subjective strands mark the books I have chosen for my study.

As these Aboriginal women writers try to reconstruct their identity, to escape from the identity constructed by the other, the conflicting strands in the identities of the writers come to the forefront. It is not easy to differentiate the reconstruction clearly from the already constructed identity. The point where these two overlap becomes the point of difficulty for the writers to pronounce their stand without ambiguity, hesitation and vacillation. Even if they succeed in doing so, the reader also faces the same problems, whether to go by the writer's or by the mainstream society's or by her own judgement. This leads to the conflict of identity or the conflicting identities of the writer. This chapter will discuss the above issue in the light of different aspects of Aboriginal women's autobiographies.
Sally Morgan's *My Place* presents the writer's desperate longing to reach out to her roots. Her grandmother Gladys represents the Aboriginal women of the previous generations. She has neither lost the physical traits nor acquired Aboriginal skills. Black in complexion, non-white in features, Sally Morgan says that her grandmother has immense love for nature and animals; she identifies and sympathises with all Aborigines, believes in Aboriginal medicine, religion and practices. Like an indigenous woman violently placed in an alien culture and looked down upon by "civilisation", she is scared of hunger, natural calamities, discrimination and the police. She lives every minute dreading threats from these. Ironically, she loves her Aboriginal identity but at the same time desperately tries to hide it.

Sally Morgan’s mother is another symbol of Aboriginal consciousness:

Mum was passionately interested in the world of nature, and avidly watched any television programme dealing with cruelty to animals. She would sit in her favourite chair by the fireside and, between sobs, decry the brutality of man…. Her passion was for the dead as well as the living.

(Morgan 90)

The principle of life for people who live in association with nature anywhere in the world is awareness of nature. This awareness becomes the code of life for them because they depend on nature for their survival and sustenance and look upon nature as a gift given to them. From this follows a special respect for nature. This in turn leads to their concept of caretakership of and responsibility towards nature. Since they live in close association and partnership with nature, they also learn how to face and escape from dangers. The second stage of awareness is concern for it. Whether it is thought of as Mother Earth or
Mother Nature, its worship is a result of awe and responsibility towards nature. Similar is the case of the Aboriginal people of Australia. Since even their central creation myth is essentially naturalistic, we can conclude that this concern characterises traditional Aboriginal existence. (It is unlikely to be otherwise in other pre-technological communities around the world. At the same time, it is also likely to be different from a deep interest in nature that is protectively missionary or objectively scientific that characterises some people in the modern world.) Let us consider the birth of "First Woman" in the Australian Aboriginal Creation Myth "The First Man". The yacca tree's flower stalk grew rounder, limbs began to form from it and "with a shock Man realised that the tree was changing into a two-legged creature like himself (Reed 1998: 18). That is how woman takes birth more or less directly from nature, thus suggesting that nature and the human being are one. There are also other stories among the myths, some of which have been discussed in the Introduction before this. They depict the change of humans into animals, trees, rocks and streams. This is a clear indication of erasing the barriers between human life and nature and establishing interaction and bond between them.

This "love" of nature is actually a serious awareness and concern, both of which characterise Aboriginal life, according to Sally Morgan in her autobiography. For example, Sally Morgan's mother retains her Aboriginal consciousness though she no longer has an unalloyed or a complete Aboriginal appearance. Nor does she openly admit

---

3 An instance of this concern is the Chipko Movement of tribals in North-Eastern India for preservation of forests. Under the leadership of Sunderlal Bahuguna, people actually hugged trees (this is what "chipko" means) threatened by fellers. In another case, the Narmada Valley Movement of tribals for preservation of their lands in the leadership of Medha Patkar and others in India: this movement basically opposes a "big dam" project on the Central Indian river Narmada. Subsequent to this protest movement, a high-powered British study has, indeed, identified "big dams" as disasters in waiting.
her Aboriginal identity. She does not reveal her and her family's *Aboriginality* to her children and when her mother tells her grandchildren that they are Indians, Sally Morgan's mother does not question the statement. This reticence may be traced to her marriage to a white man. Sally Morgan herself expresses her belief in Aboriginal customs and practices. She understands the birdcall heard before her grandmother's death. She feels the presence of the spirits of her ancestors. Throughout the autobiography she conforms to her Aboriginal consciousness and reasserts her *Aboriginality*, though she herself lives away from Aboriginal culture and is not really aware in specific terms of her Aboriginal lineage.

Like *Aboriginality*, Aboriginal consciousness is also a term which can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is not a single, essential quality that defines Aboriginality. In trying to define Aboriginal consciousness, there is a danger of falling into theorising a lifestyle and imprisoning it in the framework of jargon. Since the models that we have before us are all, starting from the use of the word Aborigine, given by the colonisers, it also becomes difficult to define and interpret such concepts from within the Aboriginal ethos. Yet the use of western or colonial terms is unavoidable. When we refer to a society or community living in close association with nature or in dependence on nature, it does not in any way mean that only tribal societies live in association with nature and not any other societies. All living beings depend on nature for their survival and sustenance. But the kind of tribal societies which the Australian Aboriginal communities represent, as Aboriginal oral and written literatures unveil, have immense respect for nature and strive towards harmony between nature and human beings. Before the colonial life-style, they kept the food chain going and thus achieved ecological balance, for they neither killed
nor destroyed more than they needed. Land was essential part of their being and lifestyle. They believed in the sacredness of the land that is their spirituality (Ginibi 1994). Thus their belief, lifestyle and knowledge imbibe respect and concern for nature and other living beings. When it is said that in part Aboriginal consciousness may be defined as love for nature it is not in the tone of calling Aboriginal people savages or primitives or projecting them as exotic people. One is, however, definitely setting them apart from self-conscious modern associations and organisations working towards protection of nature and environment.

This sense of Aboriginality, which they inherit as part of cultural transmission and which establishes sense of belonging or oneness, also means resistance to western lifestyle in a way, since the principles that guide Aboriginal life and western life contradict each other. We can draw this conclusion from Aboriginal literature. The historical fact of their inability today to retreat into their original relationship with nature also makes them nostalgic about this loss. Anne Brewster rightly observes that many Aboriginal people see their spirituality as an emblem of Aboriginality. While discussing Aboriginal spirituality in My Place, Brewster says that here it takes various forms and that one of these is a love of the bush. The swamp and the bush also instill in the children a love of nature and become a part of their consciousness: "From this point of view it has a spiritual significance and is a site of comfort and protection" (Brewster 1996: 27). This sense, in other words, participates in consciousness of the colonial situation. In Alan Lawson's words, post-colonialism is a "politically motivated historical-analytical movement [which] engages with, resists, and seeks to dismantle the effects of colonialism in the material, historical, cultural-political, pedagogical, discursive, and textual
domains” (Lawson 156). In the current Aboriginal situation, it is not merely the effects of the past colonisation but also the ongoing colonisation within which the discourse of the writers takes place, and in this post-colonial consciousness, awareness of past relationship with nature figures prominently.

For instance, Sally Morgan and her grandmother speak out against hospitals, in the process providing for a critique of the wider white society which the hospitals represent. The western approach to life is repeatedly criticised because it fails to understand life in its fullness. The contrast between western materialistic approach and Aboriginal spiritual approach to the complex totality of human experience is firmly established in several women’s autobiographies. Although written in part in a western mode and the coloniser's language, one can see degrees of post-colonial awareness in My Place, as in other Aboriginal texts, in its hankering after indigenous life in order to oppose the colonisers’ culture. Anita Heiss observes,

In terms of defining Aboriginal writing as "post-colonial" literature, it appears that there are two distinct views. First, that of the literary establishment who use the term as a way of describing a genre in which Aboriginal people write; and second, that of most Aboriginal writers who see the term implying that colonialism is a matter of the past and that decolonisation has taken place, which of course is not the case.

(Ruffo 226)

In connection with this last idea, the questions that Kathryn Trees and Colin Johnson raise about the term post-colonial are interesting: does the post-colonial suggest colonialism is quite over? They say that post-colonialism is a "white" concept and that
definitely it is not only colonialism for Aboriginal people in the past, because internal racial discrimination continues in Australia (Trees and Johnson 264-265). In contrast, Melissa Lucashenko agrees that their writing reflects the effects of being colonised. Lucashenko says that everything in her life, including her writing, is touched by or has risen out of colonialism, not being able to grow out of anything traditional. She says, "I’m not saying that we're not oppressed, I’m saying that what I define as a colonial era is ending and now the oppression is still there, but the circumstances of our oppression are changing" (Ruffo 228).

Anne Brewster emphasises that post-colonialism does not apply to the Aboriginal situation. She refers to various definitions of post-colonialism, one of which is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s analysis that post-colonialism assumes that decolonisation has taken place (Spivak 65-76). Brewster says, "Aboriginal people do not produce narratives of post-coloniality or even decolonisation, although in their demand for self-determination they certainly articulate what Ngugi (1986) calls 'decolonising the mind'. What they write and speak are narratives of continuing dispossession and surveillance" (Brewster 1995: 20). The definition of post-colonialism given by Alan Lawson mentioned earlier seems to be quite relevant to the voices raised by Aboriginal women writers. This is exactly what we find in Australian Aboriginal women's autobiographies in general and in Sally Morgan's *My Place* in particular.

We have been suggesting here that the Aboriginal consciousness of man's place in nature is not merely a matter of mythology or the recent resurgence in exotic-looking tribal art, or a mere creation of cultural reconstruction. For our contention that these three themes are essentially related in the writing of at least the Aboriginal women, we now
adduce in support some passages from their autobiographies. These examples will show the link we have proposed among concern for nature, Aboriginal consciousness and identity, and post-coloniality or awareness of existence in a post-colonial situation. In her story of God's gift to his very few special people, Marnie Kennedy says that God said,

"I have chosen to give this land and all its riches to the black race, a race of people who will not destroy its natural beauty. They will live in harmony with all that is given them. They will be made aware of the dangers of wild animals and reptiles and of the sea that will surround them. They will have their own healing ways from the things given them. This land will be their paradise and these people will remain humble and proud and will worship none other than the beauty that is theirs."

(Kennedy 61; emphasis added)

In Ida West's Pride against Prejudice we find examples such as the following, very practical yet sympathetic or harmonious, description:

We did our share of black tracking. If we were out in the bush, we would make signs to get home. We could track down snakes. We could tell which way the snakes were going on the soft sand.

We learned to tell if the snake was going away or towards the house. A snake never liked to travel over buffalo grass-they would go over it slowly, as they couldn't cling to the leaves. (West 25)

In When the Pelican Laughed Nannup makes explicit the claim that it is a long-standing tradition:
There are pools all over that country and you're not allowed to go near them unless you make your peace, that's the Aboriginal law. As soon as you do that, and you're accepted, you can have a drink. But if you don't do it, and just take from the pool, then anything can happen to you. That's beautiful isn't it? To keep your tradition and never let it go. (Nannup 224; emphasis added)

Margaret Tucker goes a step farther, in If Everyone Cared to an influential instance in her life of how her mother treated creatures:

Sometimes Mother got up at night to attend to animals whimpering with the cold, to make them comfortable in a corner on an old bag or something. I saw her once help a beautiful, proud, fierce-looking eagle that a gun-happy youth had shot down, breaking its wing. I don't know how she fixed up the wing, but she kept the fire burning to keep it warm. There was a huge goanna too, that was wounded with a pea rifle. She taught us compassion for hurt things, and especially for hurt people.

(Tucker 64-65)

And finally, Noonuccal states in so many words the ultimate do's and don'ts of this harmonious and responsible relationship of man and nature: "One rule he [her father] told us we must strictly obey. When we went hunting, we must understand that our weapons were to be used only for the gathering of food. We must never use them for the sake of killing. This is in fact one of the strictest laws of the Aborigine, and no excuse is accepted for abusing it" (Noonuccal 1972: 6). Instances of this kind of proof, of the way
Australasian Aboriginal people were expected to live in the midst of the riches of nature, can be easily multiplied.\(^4\)

Another crucial factor in their assertion of identity is their pride in their Aboriginality. They do not express any self-pity for their present condition, rather a nostalgia for their Aboriginal past and a protest against present discrimination. Although they are treated as inferiors by the white society at every step, Aboriginal women writers do not give up their battle. For example, Ida West declares:

> We were always brought up by our mother and father to think of ourselves as good as the next one. We came into the world head first and we go out feet first, and that goes for everybody, without the breech baby. So Europeans are made no better, and they smell just the same when they pass away, so there is no difference. God made us all—as long as we get by and try to help people and not be so greedy by wanting everything.  

(West 8)

These words may work not only as eye openers for white readers but also encourage the Aborigines to release themselves from the prejudiced and inhibited notions that prevail in society. This attitude reveals not only the Aboriginal concept of fraternity and equality

---

but also attacks the rigidly stratified western society. True, Ida West is encouraged to consider herself equal to whites. But do whites consider her their equal? Their opinion may not matter to her as a postcolonial protesting individual and also because her autobiography is a protest against whites. But the possibility of a different reaction to Ida West's assertion of identity may lead once again towards an identity crisis.

Sally Morgan's grandmother expresses her agony saying, "'You know, Sal...all my life, I been treated rotten, real rotten.... I been treated like a beast. Just like a beast of the field. And now, here I am...old. Just a dirty old blackfella'" (Morgan 352). This statement mirrors the fears and reasons of Sally Morgan's grandmother and the reasons behind her attempts to hide her Aboriginality. When she says that she has been treated like a beast, she is voicing the agony of all Aborigines who have been treated like beasts. The word beast echoes with multiple meanings and the ways in which she was understood and treated by the whites. A beast is, first of all, not a human being like the whites. A beast is uncivilised, fit for hard toil only, and it can be owned or disowned and disposed of. When she says that she is just a dirty old blackfella, she expresses the white people's contempt for blacks. For Aborigines, their fellow Aborigines are blackfellas. But for whites, all Aborigines are dirty blackfellas. This statement of Sally's grandmother discloses her disgust with her past, contempt for her present and fear for her future or rather for her family's future.

This issue of the Aborigines' effort to hide their identity is not much emphasised in other autobiographies. The main reason for this seems to be that apart from narrating her own story, Sally Morgan makes her people narrate their family history as well. Other narrators are given as much importance as Sally Morgan enjoys in her autobiography,
perhaps even more. This does not happen in other autobiographies, though other writers too make an effort to narrate Aboriginal stories while narrating their own story. Moreover, the changing attitude of the contemporary generation towards their Aboriginal identity may also be responsible for this. Sally Morgan's grandmother is scared of her identity because of her suffering in life and tries to hide her identity. At the same time she cannot deny it either. Contrary to this, Sally Morgan accepts, declares, constructs and asserts her Aboriginal identity. This does not merely represent an attitudinal change in a family but a change in the political situation of Aborigines in Australia.

As the readers go through *My Place* and try to understand Sally Morgan's struggle to come to terms with her Aboriginal identity, some inevitable questions do confront them: How did Sally Morgan come to terms with her "Indian identity"? Did she try to search for "Indian roots" as she did with her Aboriginal identity? Between her being told that she is an Indian and her finding out that her lineage is in fact Aboriginal, not much is said about her feelings and experiences as an "Indian". This particular phase of Sally Morgan's life remains completely undiscussed. Is the exclusion of everything other than Aboriginal deliberate? As an "Indian", what were her experiences and her reactions to those experiences? Why does this phase remain unrepresented?

Another dimension of this crucial concept of identity is the Aboriginal dilemma about Aboriginality. *Aboriginality* is defined in a number of ways that sometimes radically differ from each other. The concept of Aboriginality according to the Aborigines may be different from that of whites. Ross Watson, an activist, says in *Living Black*,

158
But what is Aboriginality? Is it being tribal? Who is an Aboriginal? Is he or she someone who feels that the Aboriginals are somehow dirty, lazy, drunken, bludging? Is an Aboriginal anyone who has some degree of Aboriginal blood in his or her veins and has demonstrably been disadvantaged by that? Or is an Aboriginal someone who has had the reserve experience? Is Aboriginality institutionalized gutlessness, an acceptance of the label "the most powerless people on earth"? Or is Aboriginality, when all the definitions have been exhausted, a yearning for a different way of being, a wholeness that was presumed to have existed before 1776? (Gilbert 1978: 184)

Apart from stating that Aboriginality depends on several aspects of life, these questions and debates also push writers into a dilemma as to whether they can be called Aborigines or not and whether they are entitled to the benefits of Aboriginal identity which they claim in their autobiographies.

Jackie Huggins, on the other hand, makes it clear that whatever may be her definition of Aboriginality, she does not agree with the white assumption of Aboriginality. She says,

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. (Huggins 1993: 459)
While the above two statements present the individual stands on behalf of their community about Aboriginality, Sally Morgan expresses her dilemma about her Aboriginality:

Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for some one like me? (Morgan 141)

This debate or such questions are really crucial in Aboriginal autobiographies. Is it possible for anybody to claim Aboriginality without experiencing the Aboriginal predicament? What decides Aboriginality: awareness, experience, expression, sympathy, empathy, activism or lineage? In contemporary Australia, does Aboriginality mean being a hunter and gatherer, participating in corroborees and hearing Dreamtime stories and growing with an Aboriginal identity? Or is it staying away from all these things, but at the same time longing for them, unaware of or even trying to escape from Aboriginal identity? What is the nearest description of Aboriginality or Aboriginal identity or Aboriginal situation in contemporary Australia? Whichever comes close to reality for each person must be the real definition of any concept. That way, Sally Morgan, in expressing her doubts about her Aboriginality, also asserts her right to claim Aboriginality. This is not ambiguity or paradox, but the reality of those robbed of their heritage.
Not only does she assert her Aboriginal identity, but she also tries to define it. Her statement reveals that according to her, Aboriginality is living off the land, living like a hunter and gatherer, participating in corroborees and listening stories of the Dreamtime. Does this really reflect the Aboriginal consciousness of contemporary times? When Australia was uninvaded and Aboriginal life was uninterferred with, Sally Morgan's definition or understanding of Aboriginality may have been apt. But, given the facts of colonisation, urbanisation, and discrimination, the Aboriginal experience amounts to a diversion from "Aboriginal lifestyle".

It has already been mentioned that Sally Morgan asserts her indigenous roots like all other Aboriginal writers. That most Aboriginal writers are part-Aboriginals or part-whites is an undeniable fact. This affords them a clear insight into the problems of Aborigines in the process of acculturation. This also equips them to express anxiety about the gradually disappearing Aboriginal traits and qualities and Aboriginal lifestyle. A very strong Aboriginal consciousness and a compulsion to hide their Aboriginal identity and to lose their physical traits that stand for the Aboriginal lineage lead to the conflict within themselves and also between them and white society. Their physical traits lost, traditional lifestyle and location lost-then what Aboriginal identity remains with them, except their Aboriginal consciousness? Once again, to quote Sally Morgan:

I suppose, in hundreds of years’ time, there won’t be any black Aboriginals left. Our colour dies out; as we mix with other races, we’ll lose some of the physical characteristics that distinguish us now. I like to think that, no matter what we become, our spiritual tie with the land and the other unique qualities we possess will somehow weave their way
through to future generations of Australians. I mean, this is our land, after all, surely we've got something to offer. (Morgan 306)

Aboriginal writers mostly refer to the Aboriginal loss of land, language, culture and liberty. This is one place where Sally Morgan expresses her concern for the loss of physical traits that stand for Aboriginality. This is another crucial deciding factor, for Aboriginal identity which perversely becomes the basis of their colour and features in a white dominated society. Although black colour is despised and Aboriginal physical features are ridiculed by the whites and discrimination occurs on the basis of their physical traits, Sally Morgan expresses concern for their loss. She does not express happiness about acculturation, which results in the loss of Aboriginal qualities. She says that unfortunately acculturation is resulting in the loss of their Aboriginal lineage. Aboriginal literature fights for equality and at the same time, as it is articulated in the above quotation, it also fights for retaining and preserving their Aboriginal identity and continued existence. Sally Morgan's words succeed in expressing anguish for the eliminated Aboriginality and in reasserting the Aboriginal identity and attachment to Aboriginal culture and land. The identity crisis emanates from the conflict between Aboriginal consciousness and a longing for Aboriginal lifestyle and the loss of physical traits of Aboriginal people.

Ruby Langford Ginibi also expresses similar concern for the disappearing Aboriginality and strongly attacks the isolationist policies of the government. Although they have their own homes only in name, the Aborigines are chained and imprisoned in restrictions imposed by the government and the discriminatory attitude of society. She 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. So far as the government is concerned, assimilation by absorption is working well, and in the end, there'll be no Aboriginal problem whatever. (Ginibi 1988: 176-77)

This is another context in which this concern for Aboriginal identity is strongly expressed. Assimilation by absorption may result only in the elimination of Aborigines. After some time there will be only part-Aborigines who the government thinks can be reformed since they have white blood in them. Thus there will be no more Aboriginal problems because there will be no Aborigines at all. On the one hand, white society's efforts to destroy Aboriginal identity and on the other Aborigines' endeavour to protest and preserve their Aboriginality—these two forces engender the conflicting identities of Aborigines. In spite of such apparently insurmountable hurdles, this conflict results in a more powerful assertion of Aboriginal identity and in an increasingly intense struggle to champion the identity that has been tampered with by discrimination and assimilation.

Aboriginal religions and Christianity are two vastly different ways of life and Australian Aborigines have, with all their spiritual traditions, inevitably had to embrace Christianity. There are some writers who reveal their immense devotion to Christ. But there are also writers who come down heavily on the side of Aboriginal religion. Ida West, however, proposes a sort of harmony between Aboriginal religion and Christianity. For her parents belonged to these two different religions and their children believed in
and practised both religions. She refers to this fact in her autobiography. Yet, simultaneously, her memory may have forced her to reveal some bitter aspects of her religious life, for instance, that as a child she and her siblings were forcibly taken to church and were ordered to follow the proceedings and observe the rites. These two parts of her testimony clash with each other and raise doubts as to whether the reason behind her reluctance in going to the church was her childishness or her dislike of Christianity. Here is the confused religious identity of Ida West, who confesses in her autobiography that she and her family members were all devout Christians, yet she also records that she was taken to church forcibly. She was a Christian by overt religious identity, yet she remained an Aboriginal Christian and this fact has obviously influenced her religious life.

We also come across another instance of a devout Aboriginal Christian in Aboriginal women's autobiographies. Glenyse Ward, in her autobiography Wandering Girl, accepts Christianity and the image of nuns as sources of succour and this forms a crucial feature of her autobiography. Brought up in a Catholic mission, Glenyse Ward remains a faithful follower of Christianity but her love of nature and living beings, which is a fundamental principle of Aboriginal religion, guides her throughout her life. Her Christian identity does not trouble her at all. She happily admits that identity and she wants to remain a Christian, for that matter she never debates her religious identity. It is the church that looked after her as a child and it is the church that provides her livelihood. But what kind of life and livelihood the church has given her and what the influence of the church is on her, are important questions. It is true that she grew up in a Catholic mission but she also grew up as an Aboriginal girl. Similarly, the Church provides her employment but as a virtual slave in a white household. She is taught in the Catholic
mission not to talk unless she is spoken to and never to talk back. She has had to imbibe
the idea of white superiority during her stay in the fold of the church that moulds her into
a good slave. Thus, there may not be an overt conflict between her Aboriginal religious
identity and her Christian identity, for Ward does not know or remember much about her
Aboriginal religion. Clearly, Glenyse Ward’s Aboriginal identity has been subjugated in
the name of religion and welfare. The Christianity that Glenyse Ward was forced to
embrace teaches her only to degrade her Aboriginal identity. Therefore, although there is
no conflict in her mind about her religious identity, her Christian identity definitely
affects and moulds her Aboriginal identity in an adverse manner and this almost directly
leads to the conflict her Aboriginal identity has to face in the white dominated society. In
her autobiography Don’t Take Your Love to Town Ruby Langford Ginibi states that
western religion cannot encompass life in its fullness, whereas Aboriginal religion
definitely does so. But there is no direct criticism of Christ and Christianity and the writer
herself seems to be a believing Christian like most other Aborigines and Aboriginal
writers.

It is in Sally Morgan’s My Place that we come across a direct attack on the
principles of Christianity: "Take the white people in Australia, they brought the religion
here with them and the Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Steal, and yet they stole this
country. They took it from the innocent. You see, they twisted the religion. That’s not the
way it’s supposed to be" (Morgan 213). At least some Aborigines think that it was not
the religion but the white people that twisted them. And they also know that Christians
were not supposed to indulge in such outrageous contradiction of their religion. The
Aboriginal people realised, sooner or later, that white people stole their land, using
religion as a weapon, even though their own religion strictly prohibited stealing. Once again it is not Christ and Christianity that are attacked but the attitude of white "Christians". Sally Morgan's granduncle Arthur, who speaks the above words, expresses his invincible faith in the Christian concept of God.

A similar instance of a devout Christian protesting against the way in which whites practice Christianity may be seen in Shirley Smith's autobiography Mum Shirl. Shirley Smith admits that hers was a Roman Catholic family and that her mother was called "Mad Roman Catholic" by non-believers. Shirley Smith also reveals that she enjoyed her mother being referred to like that because there was respect in it. But she also says that she rebelled against the priest who overlooked her because of her Aboriginal identity. She, indeed, walked out of the church after an argument with the priest and kept away for almost fifteen years:

Catholics say one thing and do another. They talk about all people being equal and all being God's children, and they then go about treating Aboriginal people as though they had no rights, or as though they didn't exist. The Catholic churches, too, are built upon land that has been stolen from Aboriginal people, and that doesn't seem to bother the Catholics at all. (Smith, Shirley 37)

This seems to reveal trust in Christian principles but not in Christian practice. Mum Shirl, in her autobiography, protests vehemently against the practice. The distance between the preaching and the practice of Christian people is strongly criticised by Mum Shirl, because it was one of the factors that determined the predicament of Aborigines. Equality and rights, and injunctions against crimes like stealing were never put into
practice by whites; moreover, they were used against the Aborigines by luring them with a religion like Christianity. That the churches were built on Aboriginal land stolen by whites itself puts the principles and practice of Christianity by whites into question.

This strong belief in Aboriginal religion and questioning of Christian practice from an Aboriginal perspective have led to an identity crisis. It has become one of the themes of Aboriginal literature, especially Aboriginal women's autobiographies. This crisis raises several questions in the readers. For instance, are these writers, spiritually, Christians or Aborigines? Are they both? If they are both, is it possible to achieve such harmony between two religions? If they are neither, why and how do they carry the double burden of religious identity? In her interview with Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, when asked about her conflict between Christianity and Aboriginality, Sally Morgan says:

I think there is a conflict when people make it a conflict, you know, but also people are amazingly flexible. Spirituality doesn't function on one level, it functions in layers, and so you might have a form of spirituality in the Christian sense but then you can have another from outside of that which is just as valuable, and that tends to be what happens in Aboriginal people. They will function on one level and you will talk about certain things in certain ways within a Christian context. If you happen to be a church goer, when you are outside that formalised institution you can function on another level of spirituality which you then talk about. There are some things that you only share with certain people. I think that people
can function on lots of different levels without there being a conflict. (Bird and Haskell 11-12)

It is amazing to hear from Sally Morgan that conflict arises when people make it a conflict. Her own autobiography is full of conflict. A constant debate goes on between her sense of Aboriginal religion and her Christianity and this conflict comes out in the book subtly but definitely. When she says that people can function at different levels without there being a conflict, she does not, surprisingly, refer to the conflict such a situation can engender. In any case, clearly, one would have to face some conflict if one is forced to or wants to function at different levels. Especially in a country like Australia where every part of Aboriginal life has been colonised, it cannot be easy to live without a spiritual or religious conflict. When Christianity is superimposed on Aboriginal religions or Aboriginal religions are replaced by Christianity, both of which phenomena have happened in Australia, there is bound to be conflict. Especially when there is force and compulsion, it is all the more difficult. This must, surely lead to conflict of religious identities. And such crises have formed a crucial part of the identity crisis among the Aborigines, especially Aboriginal women. For as women they would be subjected to or exposed to many more kinds of conflicts in different aspects of life from different angles.

In connection with religion and spirituality we cannot but glance at the ritualistic Aboriginal societies and the role of women. Diane Bell’s Daughters of the Dreaming helps us with a brilliant picture of Aboriginal women and their role in and attachment to rituals. She says,

What I saw was a strong, articulate and knowledgeable group of women who were substantially independent of their menfolk in economic and
ritual terms. Their lives were not ones of drudgery, deprivation, humiliation and exploitation because of their lack of penis and attendant phallic culture, nor was their self-image and identity bound up solely with their child-bearing and child-rearing functions. Instead I found the women to be extremely serious in the upholding, observance and transmission of their religious heritage. Religion permeated every aspect of their lives.

(Bell 231)

What happens to these strong, articulate and knowledgeable women in contemporary male dominated white society? Going by Diane Bell’s words, what happens to the all-pervading religion in their lives in a society where spirituality and religion are defined in a very different manner? If religion and rituals play such a crucial role in an Aboriginal woman's life, has not a void been created in her mind and life without rituals? Is it as easy as Sally Morgan says to state that there is no conflict? Does the changing role of Aboriginal woman in her transition from bush to settlement life not create any conflict in Aboriginal women’s lives? We come across Aboriginal women in Aboriginal literature who emphasize that it was the arrival of missionary presence which created shame, as it was the institutionalisation of settlement life which created households in which women were dependants. Their lives had not been full of drudgery, deprivation, humiliation and exploitation in Aboriginal societies. How did they adjust to the completely different society outside? Even if they live with black men what is their predicament in the changed atmosphere and changing frustrated companionship? What happens in Aboriginal societies is as important as what happens in the urban situation of Aboriginal women. What is their position in urban society? The image that Diane Bell depicts
comes alive in Aboriginal women's autobiographies and also raises the questions we have raised here.

Diane Bell continues:

I am suggesting it as not only the opportunities available to Aboriginal women but also the white perception of woman's role which constrained Aboriginal women. Missionaries needed to create God-fearing women who knew shame. In addition white bosses needed women to perform a number of duties and to fulfil a number of roles. Cattle station managers wanted workers who were all-round helpers. Of course in frontier conditions the usual double standards applied to women, who were expected to work hard during the day and to please the master in the evenings. Women on missions did not escape sexual exploitation either.... (Bell 96)

When women are exploited at so many levels and in so many ways, there is bound to be conflict in their mind and society about their identity and their roles. Diane Bell says that not only white men harmed Aboriginal women but also the white woman too helped in destroying the image and status of woman from an Aboriginal perspective. The contemporary situation reasserts this kind of exploitation, provides more avenues of exploitation having been created for Aboriginal women. This contemporary woman who is neither black nor white, who cannot identify with blacks and will not be received by whites, suffocates between the identities that have only victimised her in a society where gender is an extra burden for individuals from an already suffering marginalised sections. This conflict is undoubtedly reflected in Aboriginal women's autobiographies.
Keeping in mind the limitations of Diane Bell as a researcher, that she was an outsider however honest and thorough she was in her research and the fact that the field of her research was not a natural habitat but a government colony, we may be able to consider her statements only with a degree of skepticism. But the issue of the silence and secrecy that Aboriginal women practice especially in spiritual matters appeals to her readers. The conflicting identities of an Aboriginal woman-as a traditional Aboriginal woman with Aboriginal heritage and an Aboriginal woman in a coloniser's society-leads to several strategies adopted by Aboriginal women writers in exposing the white atrocities, one among which is silence. Silence is the most powerful weapon if it is effectively and rightly used. The same thing happens here. Not only presence but also absence can "speak" volumes when it is employed at crucial junctures and this is one of the features we definitely see in Aboriginal autobiographies.

*****

Similar conflicting identities arise when these writers discuss the question of matriarchy and feminism. For instance, Sally Morgan, like in her other statements, proves to be controversial even when she talks about matriarchy in her family. In her interview with Mary Wright, "A Fundamental Question of Identity", she says: "It's a matriarchal society.... I know I'm domineering! And Mum is in her way, too. That's probably why we conflict sometimes. People complain about me and say 'Oh, you're such a strong person, Sally', but I mean, look what I grew up with!" (Rutherford 100). What is the matriarchal society she refers to? In connection with "matriarchy", however, not much overt reference seems to emerge from the other autobiographies under review here. In fact, as in other instances of matriarchal societies, it is not unlikely that even here the
phenomenon is neither always clear nor really prevalent across Australia. Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville, through the life stories of the Five black matriarchs, try to construct the history of Matriarchy in Aboriginal societies. The white colonisation brought tremendous changes and in a way it also contributed to "silence and secrecy" about traditional knowledge. Apparently, it was women like the five matriarchs who provided black women support in the period of rapid social change during the colonial period and the encouragement to "keep the culture going". Aboriginal men had lost their status and in many ways their purpose in life:

The story of the five matriarchs is not one of loss but of physical and cultural survival. They did, in fact, pass on to their granddaughters much of the knowledge, skills and beliefs that were essential elements in their culture. These elements remain today to inform and provide a resource for Aboriginal people for the ongoing construction of their cultural reality. (Cohen and Somerville 110-11)

In fact, it is very interesting that, on the other hand, Anne Brewster quotes Jan Pettman's warning in Living in the Margins against romanticising Aboriginal women as matriarchs because to do so may conceal the pressure on Aboriginal families and overestimate the ability of Aboriginal women to protect and sustain themselves and their families. Brewster reasserts Jan Pettman's argument by saying, "We need to remember that the 'black matriarchy' is a product of the poverty-induced conditions of a racially oppressed proletarian subgroup" (Brewster 1995: 44). Certain examples of opinion in this issue are available, for instance, in the article "Bloodlines—not extinguishment" Kathy Malera-Bandjalan says:
"Malera people are grandmother's law. We come from the grandmother's blood line. The Malera are a matrilineal nation. That means that everything connected to Malera is connected by grandmother's law. The men, the children, the Earth, the sky, the rivers, the creeks, and the sun and moon. It goes back four generations, on the women's side." (Reed-Gilbert 64)

It should be clear, then, that we may find the discussion of this subject even mired in questions such as whether we are dealing with "matriarchy" or a simpler case of "matrilineal" authority, and so on. One feels, under the circumstances, that at least in connection with our chosen set of texts, a study from outside this complex and as yet unsettled subject ought to plead inability to make any meaningful contribution.

Let us, however, take note of a statement by the Aboriginal activist Hillary Saunders: "In the black movement there is one thing that is very hard for black women. We—and I’m saying we because I know of other black women it has happened to—are sort of shot down from both sides" (Gilbert 1977: 91). This should be read in the light of the fact that majority of the Aboriginal writers are activists. Hillary Saunders says that, all the same, it is very difficult for a black woman to be a part of the black movement. If she did have matriarchal status, it seems of no consequence in this context. In actuality, black women seem to have had the worst of the bargain. A black woman is shot down in black movements because of two factors, that is her race and her gender. Her race faces dangers and antagonism outside but her gender subjects her to difficulties from both within and outside her society. Although they have to face such difficulties and discouragement from two sides, Aboriginal women’s writing really does not spell out the suffering within.
There is an absolute silence regarding the exploitation within Aboriginal society. Critics like Diane Bell interpret this exploitation within as the influence of white woman's image. It has also been related to the frustrations of Aboriginal man because of discrimination in society. Both the viewpoints implicitly ignore the fact that, by and large, it was the white man who may have also influenced the colonised Aborigines most. Whatever may be the truth regarding glorification of the image of Aboriginal woman within Aboriginal societies, the stark reality of colonial and post-colonial society is that Aboriginal woman has to face ill-treatment from white society.

Sally Morgan persuades her grandmother to narrate her story. With much difficulty, convinced by others that Aborigines ought to narrate their stories from their point of view, she speaks out. But still she keeps some secrets to herself, such as her having had other children, apart from Sally Morgan's mother, who had been removed from her. When asked about this she is terribly upset. It is not uncommon for Aboriginals to attempt to maintain privacy and full control over one's thoughts, feelings, experiences and expressions. Sally Morgan pleads with her to narrate everything; for not knowing extorts its own price: "It's not a matter of secrets, Nan.... You seem to be ashamed of your past, I don't know why. All my life, you've never told me anything, never let me belong to anyone" (Morgan 148; emphasis added). Ironically, Sally Morgan's grandmother secretly fears that revealing Sally Morgan's identity may lead to the family's disowning of the children. Despite Sally Morgan's assurance that she need not be ashamed of her past, she cannot but be ashamed. This kind of adverse effect on questions of Aboriginal identity often arises on account of white people's attitudes.

*****
In her autobiography, Ruby Langford Ginibi says that there are three types of Koori people in Australia: the traditional tribal people, mission-bred ones like her, and urban Koori. But she considers them all one "mob". Although Ruby Langford Ginibi attempts to revive a spirit of unity, women's autobiographies offer a complex and complicated pattern of multiple identities and serious identity crises, as we have seen in our discussion so far. Some Aboriginal women writers clearly dissociate themselves from the groups with which they are identified by whites. This gives rise to a very interesting discussion about the difference between the writers' perception of their identity and society's perception of their identity. Consider Alice Nannup's case. In *When the Pelican Laughed* she presents a description of her multiple identity; she refers to her being a North-Wester as well as an international person. Obviously, Nannup is a woman, an Aboriginal woman, an Aboriginal and a North-Wester. What is her country, *North-West Australia* or *Australia*? Does her North-Wester identity set her apart from Aborigines of other parts of Australia?

Another such instance occurs in Ella Simon's *Through My Eyes*. On the subject of white man's diseases that spread among the Aborigines, she says, "it used to hurt so much when people treated me as though I was one of these old tribal people" (Simon 4). If it hurts her when she is considered "one of these old tribal people", where does she belong? A new tribal or not a tribal at all? If it hurts her to be identified with Aboriginal people, how does she justify her Aboriginal consciousness in her autobiography? In another context, Ella Simon herself puts the problem across succinctly:

If it hadn't been for my grandmother I might well have been brought up as a white. But that doesn't mean to say that I was accepted by the
Aborigines, either. Well, I was more than half white, so where was I, half white and half black, supposed to go? Where was I supposed to fit in?

(Simon 13)

This dilemma of belonging neither here nor there seems to be one of the major problems before Aboriginal women writers. Half-white and half-black, firmly or clearly accepted by neither black nor white people, where *does* Ella Simon fit in? And where does she *want* to fit in? Her statement also reveals that she is not seen as black, would have passed for a white but for her grandmother. Obviously, her colour also matters in formulating her attitude towards Aboriginal issues because if she could "pass" for a white, she might be accepted by mainstream society. That would nullify the conflict of identity in her. But does it really happen?

Oppression and discrimination can induce a defensiveness inferiority complex in the oppressed. This may give rise to a conscious disavowal of membership of the stigmatised group. Ella Simon often separates herself from Aborigines; Daisy and Gladys, in their turn, deny to Sally Morgan that they are indigenous women. The overt denial of indigenous identity by these indigenous women in certain contexts, however, does not disrupt their socio-cultural practices in other contexts. To quote Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Indigenous women's subjectivity has been shaped by historically imbued representations of Indigeneity developed in anthropological and legal discourses as much as by Indigenous discourse of self-presentation" (Moreton-Robinson 29).

Compared to these issues and discussions, the identity crisis of Roberta Sykes as it is revealed in her three volume autobiography *Snake Dreaming* seems to be much more intense and disturbing. Her identity is ambiguous not only to herself but also to the
readers. Yet for the society around her, she remains a black and she is judged by the white society around her as a natural target of its prejudices. Her identities, therefore, seem to shift according to her changing perceptions of herself and yet society's perception of her identity refuses to change. As a black, she is always looked upon with suspicion and mistrust. Because she is black, she is gang raped. She is almost killed only because of her "blackness". After this incident, perversely, the identity of a licentious woman is also added to her black identity. Her post-rape trauma, her staying away from men, are interpreted as inclination towards lesbianism; some women actually make advances to her. Yet she is recognised as a snake woman by some Aboriginal people who identify her with the snake people from the North. Even the fierce dogs attack her without the least provocation from her.

While her identity as a black is so clearly, variously or even perversely recognised by society, Roberta Sykes herself reels under the contradictions implicit in her confused and multiple identity. She knows nothing about her origin. She realises that she is different from her white mother and other white people around her and cannot identify herself with either white or black. As a helpless rape victim, she walks from hospital to police station to court, seeking audience or understanding. Not only does the rape result in trauma, eventually an unwanted child is also bora. As an unwed mother, Roberta Sykes struggles in search of livelihood and self-esteem. She moves from one job to another, as a snake dancer in a nightclub and various jobs in Aboriginal organisations. She becomes an Aboriginal activist. She even obtains a doctorate from Harvard University. But the fundamental question about her identity has dogged her life at least up to that point.
She knows little not only about her father and origin, but also about her religion. Whether her mother has a religion or not is also a question for her but she understands that her mother has a particular dislike for Catholics. Her mother, who is considered a sinner for having black children, calls Catholics hypocrites for throwing out coloured people from school when in fact they were supposed to save souls. Coming from a family based on "secrets and deceit" and without any security, Roberta Sykes recognises that she is different and can easily be picked up in a group:

No matter that I wore the same uniform, did the same schoolwork, drank the same water and ate the same food, I was different and would always be different. In that flash of awareness, I realised that in my lifetime people would always see my colour first, no matter how good I was or how hard I worked, and that they'd attribute to me whatever feelings they had about people of colour. (Sykes 1997: 51)

Roberta Sykes is a black according to white society and that gives rise to her multiple identities that were the lot of black people. She cites an incident from her life when the detectives encountered her:

"Where's your pass—or are you a runaway?"

"Are you under the Act? What reserve are you from?"

"I don't live on a reserve. I don't know what Act you're talking about. You'd better leave me alone because my mother's white." (Sykes 1997: 218)

Thus, it is her mother's white identity that comes to her rescue not only here but also later when her rape criminals are punished by the court. It is a rare occurrence for
white men to be punished for raping a black woman, points out Roberta Sykes. If it is her mother's white identity that comes to the rescue of Roberta Sykes and also subjects her to confusion and chaos, surely her identity is a matter of conflict.

As a rape victim, Roberta Sykes looks at herself as becoming evil, but wants to name her son Jesus for his mother had neither played a sexual role in his conception nor desired or craved for his conception. Is this an effort to identify with the Christian concepts of purity and innocence? This does not end there but proceeds to her dilemma about the priority of her son's identity:

> My search for my own identity, I realised, had to take a back seat to the construction of my child's identity and sense of self-worth. My father's identity remained unknown. Did it matter? Would my son also wonder who his father was? And what would I be able to do about that when the time came? (Sykes 1997: 326).

Ultimately, she decides not to go in search of her roots because many people who went in search of their roots broke their hearts on reaching the destination when they were not received by "their people". The other important reason is, she questions herself as to why she should search for a man, her father, who did not want to know her. She decides to stick to her Aboriginal identity, though she does not clearly know her roots, for her experience has been an Aboriginal experience:

> even though I can't prove I'm an Aborigine, you know I've been treated like an Aborigine all my life. I was put out of school, I've been insulted and abused, and even raped in terrible circumstances because those men
thought I was an Aborigine. I have been arrested, and worked hard to bring about changes, a better life for us all. (Sykes 2000: 113)

On the one hand, she is told that being raped does not make her an Aboriginal. On the other hand she is also accused by Mum Shirl of choosing not to be Aboriginal and that she cannot prove she is not one. But she is accused by society of being incapable of proving her Aboriginal identity. This debate leads to the controversy about Roberta Sykes' Aboriginal identity. She is vehemently and perversely attacked and condemned for claiming Aboriginal identity.

While Roberta Sykes' autobiography presents the writer's dilemma and her conflict with the society about her black identity, the response to her autobiography triggered much more controversy about her identity. For instance, Pat O'Shane's article on Roberta Sykes raises many issues that become charges against Roberta Sykes. She says, "For years you've traded on the public's belief that you are Aboriginal. As far as I know, you've never actually made the claim to an Aboriginal identity yourself, but yours is not the sin of commission, it is the sin of omission" (O'Shane 29).

Pat O'Shane continues by saying that even if the story of Roberta Sykes is believed to be true, her experience cannot stand for that of the stolen generation, thus raising questions in the reader about "the Aboriginal experience". Commending Sally Morgan for trying to lift the covers and peel the layers to expose half-truths and deceits, O'Shane finds fault with Roberta Sykes for not doing that. Based on the information given in the autobiography also she attacks Roberta Sykes. She says that no old man in Aboriginal custom would stop to talk to a "lonley little girl" and talk to her the way he did according to Roberta Sykes. She also informs us that the Birringubba Jurn-Bindal
clan people have objected to Roberta Sykes’ account of the snake totem. She also finds fault with the writer for using the snake as part of her dance because it shows disrespect for the culture. She locates Roberta Sykes among people like Streten Bozic, Elizabeth Durack and Leon Carmen, who received money and fame with the help of their pretended Aboriginal identity.

This leads us into the larger controversy of assumed, attributed and acquired identities. Pat O'Shane is concerned not only about the genetic lineage of Roberta Sykes but also about her cultural awareness and commitment towards her acquired identity. While Pat O’Shane is attacking her and praising Sally Morgan for her efforts in search of her roots, Mudrooroo finds the mode of narration of Sally Morgan’s search un-Aboriginal. Jackie Huggins joins him in her attack against Sally Morgan's *My Place* and its easy accessibility to non-indigenous readers. Such controversial identities lead, on the other hand, to views such as these expressed by Rosemary van den Berg. In her article "Intellectual Property Rights for Aboriginal People" she makes an appeal for intellectual property rights for Aboriginal people in order to save them from "identity thieves". She also unveils the nonindigenous identity of people like Colin Johnson, Elizabeth Durack, Leon Carmen who have proclaimed Aboriginal identity. She calls Mudrooroo an impostor of the worst kind who has used Aboriginal identity for his own ends (Reed-Gilbert 74-81).

It should not take much more than this background for us to realize that the level of expectation from any voice far outstrips that voice's abilities. No writer can be expected to be an anthropologist as well-she may easily misread or only partially understand, say, her tribe's mythological or historical or genetic past. In the same way,
we really do need to appreciate the fact that each writer, as a person, is in a historical location which will reflect itself in her writing. When an Aboriginal writer is, for instance, deeply integrated or involved in her upbringing or influences within the dominant society, her writing may not "sound" tribal. Similarly, a woman reporting on male behaviour, especially in the past or in a semi-fictional account may not quite succeed in becoming "authentic". Such unsatisfactory features must, surely, be a professional hazard for anyone who ventures to speak or write in public. Therefore, we have a double responsibility in dealing with such representations or voices - first, certainly to keep in mind any such "problem"; and not allow it to smother or whatever else may be being expressed.

Going by the controversy about Roberta Sykes' crisis of Aboriginal identity, not only does her autobiography raise the issue of conflict within her and between her and white society, but also of conflict between her and Aboriginal society. Against the background of this controversy, does her autobiography become a kind of fiction? Is it an autobiography merely because the writer calls it so? Or fiction because it becomes manipulated against the background of the controversy? If other Aboriginal women's autobiographies flout the rigidities of the genre of autobiography consciously or unconsciously, does this controversy change the nature and description of Roberta Sykes' autobiography in the same way? Is such a mixture of genres a part of the writer's liberty or of the political discourse of Aboriginal people? What are the conflicting identities here, apart from the ones that Roberta Sykes introduces to the readers in her autobiography? Where does she fit in as the writer of autobiography and of fiction? Is the
conflict between a "genuine black identity" and an acquired identity—are these the only conflicting identities or do some more identities emerge from this controversy?

*****

With all this on the one hand, another sharper controversy about identities also exists. For instance, Sally Morgan, as it has been already discussed in the earlier chapters, confuses in an interview that what prevails in her autobiography is neither Aboriginal nor feminist consciousness but working class consciousness. But any reader of her autobiography will easily make out that in My Place Aboriginal consciousness manifests everywhere. The best evidence of this is the theme of the autobiography, that is the search for one's Aboriginal roots and the construction and assertion of Aboriginal identity. The difference between one's true identity and one's acquired identity or what one thinks is one's identity creates the conflicting identities. For instance, Sally Morgan's voice in her interview contradicts her own voice in her autobiography. She says,

I never thought consciously from any particular perspective, like whether it was Aboriginal or feminist or social class. It just sort of got written how it happened, basically. It's really interesting when you go back. I guess when you look back you can see those things in it and people sort of intellectualise a lot about structures but a lot of it was accidental. (Bird and Haskell 8)

It is not only surprising but also confusing for the readers since My Place is a text written with Aboriginal consciousness and purpose however carefully it is read and analysed otherwise. In brief, the theme of the book itself is Sally Morgan's search for her Aboriginal roots and Aboriginal identity. She goes in search of "her place" as an
Aboriginal and like many other Aboriginal women writers, Sally Morgan also articulates the reasons and her intentions behind writing her autobiography.

Probably, of all Aboriginal women's autobiographies, Sally Morgan's *My Place* is the best acclaimed and also the most attacked. Of all the critics it is Mudrooroo Narogin who attacks Sally Morgan most vehemently. He dismisses and discredits *My Place* as "battler genre", which is a white genre. He thinks that this genre shows little concern for the community. His major objection is that *My Place* is an individual story and the common concerns of Aboriginal community are given secondary importance. He says in *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, "Sally Morgan's book is a milepost in Aboriginal literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered O.K. to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black. It is an individualised story and the concerns of the Aboriginal community are of secondary importance" (Narogin 1990: 149). Although Sally Morgan herself says that she wrote her autobiography with a working class consciousness, her Aboriginal consciousness is its constant companion. She perceives herself as a working class individual and her autobiography reveals her as an Aboriginal woman. But Mudrooroo classifies her as an Aborigine who is young, gifted and not very black. This is one more aspect of her identity, acquired or attributed, apart from her being recognised on the basis of her race and gender. He says that *My Place* is an individualised story, whereas Sally Morgan believes that she presents the story of her family and her readers also get the feeling that it is representative. Thus it is not only identity crisis within the writers' personalities but also a conflict about identity between writers and critics/readers that we must contend with.
It has to be remembered here that Mudrooroo Narogin, who attacks Sally Morgan for writing like whites, was himself eventually attacked for pretending Aboriginal identity. The controversy that arose round Roberta Sykes exists in the case of Mudrooroo as well. Although there are people like Ruby Langford Ginibi who support his Aboriginal identity, the controversy remains active.

In response to Bain Attwood's article, "Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality" (Attwood 302-318), Jackie Huggins says that though she agrees with Bain Attwood in a way, she does not want to take the criticism of Aboriginal literature from a white critic. She agrees with him when Attwood says that Sally Morgan's Aboriginality is forged throughout the creation of the text and when he compares *My Place* to a detective novel. What irks her, Huggins says, about *My Place* is its proposition that Aboriginality can be understood by all non-Aboriginal people. The greatest weakness of the book is that it requires least translation for the white readers, according to Jackie Huggins. Deciding that the white editorial intervention has desecrated *My Place*, Jackie Huggins expresses her concern over all the good bits, oral histories, going to the back of the book instead of the front. Jackie Huggins concurs with Attwood's opinion when he says, "It would seem that in seeking an answer to her mystery, Morgan has been influenced by the European discourse about Aboriginality which is dominated by anthropological images of Aborigines as 'other'" (Attwood 306). Jackie Huggins finds fault with Sally Morgan for allowing the publishers to change her work into "another gross product of miscegenation" in America. Thus, like Mudrooroo Narogin, Jackie Huggins seems to define an Aboriginal work, its incomprehensibility to the non-Aboriginal readers as one of its crucial qualities. But she adds that she detests
any non-Aboriginal defining Aboriginality for her and her race and that such a definition 
insults her intelligence, spirit and soul and negates her heritage (Huggins 1993: 459-464). 
She rightly points out, "Like racism, Aboriginality is always being theorised, 
intellectualised and trivialised by those who have never felt the passion, anger or the 
pain" (Huggins 1993: 463).

Sally Morgan's *My Place* led not only to *intra-racial* discourses but also to inter-
racial discourses. One major attack against Aboriginal women's autobiographies is that 
the writers have adopted the coloniser's genre to attack the coloniser. In her article 
"Autobiographical Storytelling by Australian Aboriginal Women", Kateryna Olijnyk 
Longley observes, "Rules of authorship, ownership, and authority, for example, are so 
differently understood by Aboriginal people that the term *autobiography* is immediately 
problematized when it is used in an Aboriginal context" (Smith and Watson 371). Narogin had already raised this criticism and had provided his answer. Ngũgĩ has also 
touched upon this issue in defending the choice of the genre in African Literature. 
African writers like Ngũgĩ tried to free not only their country from British colonialism 
but also their culture from British cultural imperialism. They revolted against the 
assumed supremacy of the English language and started writing in African languages. 
And they also actively propagated use of African languages and abandonment of English. 
They emphasised the use of one’s native tongue from basic education onwards. Thus they 
worked towards the liberation, not only of their country but also of their education, 
culture, language and literature, and every other possible aspect of national life. But 
African writers also wrote and published a great deal of literature using genres that are 
assumed to be English. For example, the novel is one of the most successful and
powerful tools of African writers. Referring to this controversy concerning whether one should abandon the imperial language and literature or retain imperial genres, Ngũgĩ says,

The social or even national basis of the origins of an important discovery or any invention is not necessarily a determinant of the use to which it can be put by its inheritors.... The social history of the world before the advent of victorious socialism was the continued appropriation of the results and the genius of the labour of millions by the idle classes. Why should not the African peasantry and working class appropriate the novel? (Ngũgĩ 68)

Thus Ngugi refutes such charges levelled against African writers by stating that genres cannot be owned and disowned by anyone. In these few sentences he brilliantly sums up the world history of age-old exploitation of the working classes by the idle classes. By doing this he declares the solidarity of the working classes, whichever race or country they happened to be part of.

The Australian Aboriginal writers also have adopted the western tradition of autobiography. This is one of the strategies that Aboriginal literature, especially women's writing, uses to express its protest against western imperialism. How far we can call these books autobiographies and how to classify the genres are also crucial questions that these autobiographies raise in the readers. How they protest against this western influence of language and literature as part of their overall protest against imperialism was discussed in detail in the second chapter. This use of western literary tradition and revolt against
western imperialism simultaneously presents the conflicting identities of the writers both as followers of western tradition and as rebels against western imperialism.

Apart from the adaptation of a genre, another charge levelled against Aboriginal women's autobiographies is that they present the darker side of life and the world. Critics complain that whereas the traditional Aboriginal literature celebrates, these autobiographies establish contradictory images. That is, traditional Aboriginal literature is the happy exclamation of Aboriginal women and contemporary autobiographies are complaints and critiques. An Aboriginal woman who celebrates is different from the one who complains. There is a great variance between these two and this leads to the conflicting images and identities of Aboriginal women as unveiled in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal literature. Roberta Sykes answers this criticism by wondering what there is to celebrate. Her words not only state the stand of Aboriginal women writers but also sum up the predicament of displaced Aborigines. This issue was discussed in detail in the second chapter.

To sum up the argument in Kateryna Olijnyk Longley's words:

By violating the rules of history and biography as they have developed in the West, the Aboriginal life stories allow us to stand outside those genres and so learn to read European as well as Aboriginal culture differently.... Further, the autobiographical narratives remind us of the oral tradition from which they have only recently been drawn and the centrality of song, ritual and storytelling in that tradition. But perhaps the most useful lesson provided by Aboriginal women's autobiography is that flexibility, specifically literary flexibility, is needed so that all genres can continue to
be loosened to accommodate differences of personal and cultural vision at any time and in any place. (Smith and Watson 382-383)