

International Conference on  
"Education, Humanities, Business Management,  
Engineering, Sciences and Agro-ecology"  
(EHBSA-2019)

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## TWO SELF-NARRATIVES: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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**Abstract**—Angela Yvonne Davis was intimately involved in the Black Power Movement in the United States. Her desire was to build a society free of race and class oppression. Davis was not satisfied with some concessions within the existing socio-economic structure. She participated in revolutionary activism and tried to expose the foundation of discrimination in her land. In her self-narrative she chronicles events and experiences of the Black Power Movement. *As Davis recounts events in her life, she imparts unique views and insights not shared by her male activist counterparts. She disputes mainstream assumptions about race, class, and gender and reveals how the Black Power struggle profoundly shaped her identity. In the context of Australian Aboriginal literature Sally Morgan's My Place is found playing vital roles in reclaiming the identity of the narrator in particular and the Aborigines in general.* The text is involved in the process of reconstructing the past and forging a counter-history of the land and its indigenous populace as well. Here Morgan relies on official white Australian historical records and it demonstrates how in testimonial narrative official histories can be tools in the hands of marginalised communities who can utilise these as means of intervention. It places the family in the locus of storytelling which is a vital way through which Aboriginality is not only transmitted but constructed too.

Angela Davis: An Autobiography (1974), a self-narrative, chronicles events and experiences of the Black Power Movement in the United States. Davis was born on January 26, 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama. When Davis was four-year-old, her family moved out of the housing projects. They started living into a house on Centre Street. They were the first Black family to move into the white neighbourhood. Davis was admitted to a high school in New York City. She started living with a white family in Brooklyn. She received a full scholarship to Brandeis. She majored in French Literature and stayed a year in France for her studies. After graduation from Brandeis, she attended graduate school in Germany. There she was studying philosophy. She finished her graduate work in San Diego, at the University of California. There she was associated with Black organisations in Los Angeles and

became interested to join a revolutionary party. She was a radical of the 1960s and 1970s era and a part of the Black Liberation Movement. She joined the Communist Party in July, 1968. Her Party membership became an issue in her job because it violated the rules. She was struggling to keep her employment. The situation turned into a difficult one when she became involved in coordinating the Los Angeles movement. Its aim was to free the Three Soledad prisoners. Davis fought for what she believed in. Her imprisonment and trial from 1970 to 1972 could not curb her indomitable spirit.

At the core of Davis's narrative there is an alleged crime. In February 1970 she had become actively involved in organising the campaign to free the Soledad Brothers. One of them was George Jackson. With him she was said to have developed a romantic friendship. On August 7, 1970 there was an armed revolt at the Marin County Courthouse. It was initiated by Jonathan Jackson, George's seventeen-year-old brother. The shootout resulted in the deaths of the presiding judge, two Black defendants, and Jonathan himself. Several guards, attorneys, and spectators were wounded. One of the guns used by Jonathan Jackson was registered in Angela Davis's name. She was nowhere near the scene of the violence. Yet Davis was implicated in the revolt. She was charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. She had been, for quite some time, under surveillance by local and federal law enforcement agencies. It was because of her memberships in the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party. Jonathan Jackson's use of her gun, therefore, became a convenient basis to criminalise her and then attempt to silence her politically. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) placed her on its list of the Ten Most Wanted. In Davis's narrative there is a detailed account of the events that led to the shootout, her flight and subsequent capture, her imprisonment while awaiting trial, the trial itself in which she eloquently defended herself, and her eventual acquittal. Besides, readers find there the less known story of Davis's childhood in a racist atmosphere. Her education and the formation of her radical political philosophy have also been included in the narrative.

Davis's narrative does not start at birth, but in the underground. She and Helen are hiding from the police there. She had heard of the death of Jonathan Jackson two days back. He, along with two San Quentin deputies, James McClain, and William Christmas, had been killed in a revolt at the Marin County Courthouse. Davis is trying hard to wear a wig. She must look common. They must not attract attention when they go out. They are planning to leave as soon as it is dark. They are both nervous while they are waiting for nightfall:

I don't know how long we had been sitting in the dimly lit room when Helen broke the silence to say that it was probably not going to get any darker outside. It was time to leave. For the first time since we discovered that the police were after me, I stepped outside. It was much darker than I thought, but not dark enough to keep me from feeling vulnerable, defenceless.<sup>1</sup>

Davis feels the same kind of fear that she experienced as a child when she was left alone in the dark. She travels like a fugitive from Echo Park to the Black neighbourhood in West Adams area. Now she looks up friends and safe houses. Her "fears seemed to be confirmed in every straight-looking white man standing around."<sup>2</sup>

The situation that brought her to this point began two years earlier. There was a cocktail party fundraiser for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee of the Communist Party. The police raided the apartment of Franklin and Kendra Alexander. Money and guns were confiscated. The group was charged with armed robbery. But the charges didn't stick. They were soon released. The guns were registered to Davis. These are the same guns that had been used at the Marin County Courthouse. They are now in the hands of the authorities. Davis understands that the police would be searching for her. She had lost her job because of her Party membership. She is also involved in a movement to free the Soledad Brothers - a group of men who are in custody on murder charges that she feels are false. Her friends and her roommate, Tamu, are under close watch. Her friends arranged a place in the West Adams area for her hiding. Davis decides to find a friend, David Poindexter, in Chicago. She finds that Hattie insists to stay with her. David introduces her to Robert Lohman, a reliable friend who lives in the same building. David and Robert have a big battle that brings to an end their friendship. David and Davis now view Robert as a potential informer. Despite all the efforts Davis, however, cannot escape arrest and imprisonment.

The next two sections are titled "Rocks" and "Water", respectively. They centre first on Davis's early years. She spends most of this period in inhumanly racist Birmingham. Then she talks of her adolescent years at Elizabeth Irwin High

School in New York City. There the teachers' political beliefs range from liberal to radical Left. Her young adulthood on the campus of Brandeis University has also been described here. Her epiphanic discovery of the philosophy of Socialism is another significant episode. She goes through the Communist Manifesto avidly. It provided her answers to many of the apparently unanswerable dilemmas that had haunted her. She starts to view the problems of Black people within the context of a larger working-class movement. She begins to realise the deep signification of the emancipation of the proletariat. It can be the foundation, she understands, for the emancipation of all oppressed groups in society. Her intellectual curiosity about Marxism leads to her deep study of political theory and philosophy. In Brandeis University, she becomes a student of Professor Herbert Marcuse, a Marxist scholar and the author of *Eros and Civilisation*. She joins an organisation called Advance. Many Communists or children of Communists belong to it. She wants to return home during her last year to work in the civil rights movement. Here, readers learn that she grows up as the child of politically active people. She is associated with red diaper babies, bohemians, and internationalist leftists from an early age.

Davis's book is situated in this milieu. As a result, it directs attention of the reader to the fact of Davis's specificity or distinguished image within the Black Power Movement. It makes her not like other prisoners. To put it otherwise, it distinguishes her similar to what was done by bourgeois media. In the opening paragraph, Davis argues that a narrative like hers "would require a posture of difference."<sup>3</sup> She points out that her book needs to develop the "most essential fact" that is "the forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people."<sup>4</sup> Therefore her claim is not that her life has become identical to the lives of others. Rather she has been formed by the same forces that have formed others. It is altogether undeniable that Davis has already been differentiated, as we have seen and will see later too, by the bourgeois media. It is her endeavour through her narrative to counter such differentiation. She does so with reference to the real, outside forces of her racist land. These forces form all the selves with which she wishes to identify her own. This explains a particular aspect of the text. Regular emphases are not just on the social forces that place her in prison. It is also on those social forces that create Black women whose social positions look very different from her. But now they identify strongly with her. One of the examples is the respectable grandmother. She provides a safe house when Davis is underground. Another one is the prison guard. She apologises that it's the best job she can get. Davis writes: "when the superfluous of our ... lives were set aside, what they had in common could easily be seen. It all boiled down to the fact that we were Black and in our own ways had tried to fight the

<sup>1</sup>Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974; reprint, New York: International Publishers, 2008), 4.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., xv.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

forces that were strangling our people.”<sup>5</sup> They are the same since they are Black and on trial. She realises that, being Black and being on trial are, basically, the same thing. Being in jail is “being haunted by the spectres of all those sisters and brothers whose lives were eroding in other jails.”<sup>6</sup> Blackness is used here as a metaphor of imprisonment. Being in gaol is quintessence of the experience of Blackness. In her narrative Davis theorises and politicises her past experiences. During the process she covers several important subjects and is highlighting ways in which the personal is political. She mentions the zeitgeist of the unfolding Civil Rights Movement. It is the most immediate factor behind her growing spirit of restlessness. It provided her determination to enter organised political struggle. She also acknowledges the significance of much earlier formative experiences. They played their roles to shape her political consciousness. She recounts of the surroundings of her childhood and young adult years. She tries to address the significance of race, class, and gender oppression in Black women’s social life and their adoption to their discriminated society. She deals with its impact on the African American community in general too.

Davis recalls her growing up the Birmingham, Alabama area, making the readers aware of the bitter half of discriminated world. Her family moves into a house in the all white neighbourhood on Centre Street. She is four years old at that time.

Almost immediately after we moved there the white people got together and decided on a border line between them and us. Centre Street became the line of demarcation. Provided that we stayed on ‘our’ side of the line (the east side) they let it be known we would be left in peace. If we ever crossed over to their side, war would be declared. Guns were hidden in our house and vigilance was constant.<sup>7</sup>

When a Black family moves on the west side of the street, their house is dynamited. Here readers discover a number of remarkable things that place Davis, literally, on the border between racial formations. There she experienced nothing but hostility from local whites. But her parents were committed to teach her that white people and Black people had a history of working together, even, sometimes, in the south:

Every time I said “white lady” or “white man” anger clung to my words. My mother tried to erase the anger with reasonableness. Her experiences had included contacts with white people seriously committed to improving race relations ... She had worked to free the Scottsboro Boys and there had been whites— some of them Communists—in that struggle. Through her own political work, she had learned that it was possible for white people to walk out of their skin and respond

with the integrity of human beings ... I did not know what she was talking about.<sup>8</sup>

That she has no desire for self-revelation, is clear from Davis’s narrative. It does not begin with the aim of justification of a politics merely by foregrounding personal experience. Unambiguously she declares in her introduction to the book: “I did not really write about myself.”<sup>9</sup> Davis’s narrative offers only a sketchy outline of her personal life. In it, focus on aspects of the struggle always takes precedence. Davis’s formal education eventually includes exposure to critical literacy aiming for a social transformation. Her education involves her transfer, on a scholarship, from the Birmingham public school system. Now, she goes to the private, predominantly White and politically socialist Elizabeth Irwin High School. It is situated in Greenwich Village, New York. As part of the curriculum there she is exposed to socialist/communist ideology, and “a whole new world opened up.”<sup>10</sup>

Sally Morgan’s *My Place* holds a unique position in the history of Australian Aboriginal literature. The historical aim of *My Place* becomes conspicuous when readers go through the following:

‘Now, you know Sally’s trying to write a book about the family?’

‘Yes. I don’t know why she wants to tell everyone our business.’

‘Why shouldn’t she write a book? Mum said firmly. ‘There’s been nothing written about people like us, all the history’s about the white man (emphasis added). There’s nothing about Aboriginal people and what they’ve been through.’

‘All right’, she muttered, ‘what do you want to ask?’

‘Well, you know when you write a book, it has to be the truth. You can’t put lies in a book. You know that, don’t you Nan?’

‘I know that, Glad’, Nan nodded.<sup>11</sup>

Sally Morgan’s mother is asking her own mother who she thinks her (Sally Morgan’s grandmother) father was. *My Place* shows a link between the individual and collective dimensions of rediscovering and reclaiming Aboriginal history. The task of this rediscovering and reclaiming history largely depends upon the relation and cooperation of the members of the extended family of Sally Morgan. Here it enlarges the orbit of the genre of the testimonio by making family the locus of storytelling. Sally Morgan remembers when she was talking to her uncle:

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 293.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 327.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., viii.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>11</sup>Sally Morgan, *My Place* (London: Virago, 1987), 161.

'I want to write the history of my own family', I told him.

'What do you want to do that for?'

'Well, there's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man (emphasis added). No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything. There's a lot of our history we can't even get at, Arthur. There are all sorts of files about Aboriginals that go way back, and the government won't release them. You take the old police files, they're not even controlled by Battye Library, they're controlled by the police. And they don't like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they were supposed to be Protectors of Aborigines that it's not funny! I mean, our government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. I know Nan doesn't agree with what I'm doing. She thinks I'm trying to make trouble, but I'm not. I just want to try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story.'<sup>12</sup>

This is not the story only of her family. It is a form of historical redress. Thus it has, at the same time, communal, familial, historical, national and cultural importance. The statements are not tinged with autobiographical self-searching. In a taped interview Arthur Corunna says,

You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn't over yet. We still have a White Australia policy against the Aborigines. Aah, it's always been the same. They say there's been no difference between black and white, we all Australian, that's a lie. I tell you, the black man has nothin', the government's been robbin' him blind for years. ...

I want my story finished. I want everyone to read it. Arthur Corunna's story! I might be famous. You see, it's important, because then maybe they'll understand how hard it's been for the blackfella to live the way he wants. I'm part of history, that's how I look on it. Some people read history, don't they?<sup>13</sup>

Each section of *My Place* reveals experiences of the exploitation and abuse suffered by indigenous Australians. What Sally Morgan essays is to present a fragmented history of the Aborigines. It has been done through the voices of her mother Gladys, grandmother Daisy, and great-uncle Arthur in addition to her own research and contact with Aborigines from her ancestral lands. Her purpose is to force the readers to look at and acknowledge a hidden history of her land, to speak out for her family, and for the whole indigenous population. Her acknowledgement of her use of Battye Library to research for her book emphasises its historicity:

It's a history library. Western Australian history. I wanted to read up about Aborigines. . . Aborigines were considered subnormal and not capable of being educated the way whites were.<sup>14</sup>

To present a counter-history, therefore, Morgan relies on official white Australian historical records. Therefore, what happens here is a re-reading of mainstream or established history by the colonised. *My Place*, thus, shows official histories can also be tools in the hands of minority groups like the Aborigines. They can make use of it as means of intervention.

In *My Place* Morgan is engaged with excavation and reconstruction of hitherto silenced history. She represents the Aboriginal voices of her land. Her concern for the past, present and future of Aboriginal history and culture is the foundation of her narrative. Frederic Jameson, discussing the genre of testimonio, heralds the dispelling of the "authorship" of the old centred-subject private-property type, and the instituting of "some new collective space between named subjects and individual human beings."<sup>15</sup> He elaborates:

Anonymity here means not the loss of personal identity, of the proper name, but the multiplication of those things; not the faceless sociological average or sample or least common denominator, but the association of one individual with a host of other concrete individuals.<sup>16</sup>

Morgan speaks of her concern for the loss of physical traits that stand for Aboriginality. She knows that black colour is despised. She knows Aboriginal physical features are ridiculed by the whites. That discrimination occurs on the basis of their physical traits is not unknown to her. Still Morgan expresses concern for their loss. Aboriginal literature fights for equality. 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. Morgan's words succeed in expressing anguish for the eliminated Aboriginality. She reasserts the Aboriginal identity and attachment to Aboriginal culture and land. There is a conflict between Aboriginal consciousness and a longing for Aboriginal lifestyle and the loss of physical traits of Aboriginal people. The identity crisis emanates from here.

In *My Place* the three women's independent but interconnected journeys, literal and metaphorical, present a major challenge to official Australian history. The three female voices represent three generations. They express three attitudes towards life. To Daisy Corunna, Sally Morgan's grandmother, it is a journey towards the direction of getting rid of her Aboriginal identity. For her Aboriginal identity, Daisy is afraid of white brutalities and severance from her

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>15</sup>Frederic Jameson, "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution," in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 185.

<sup>16</sup>Jameson, "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution," 185-86.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 163-64.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 212-13.

own family. For Gladys Corunna, Morgan's mother, it is a solitary journey in life bearing the burden of her family responsibilities. For Morgan, it is a voyage of looking for her identity. It gives both her as well as the reader an insight into the forgotten identity.