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CONSTRUCTING THE FEMALE SELF –A READING OF TOMSON HIGHWAY’S *THE REZ SISTERS*

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ABSTRACT

The Aboriginals, the first residents of America, Canada and Australia who lost their lands by the ‘white’ discoveries, today live in ghettos or reservations. Aboriginal writing from these countries and Dalit writing from India are remarkable for its focus on identity politics, though different from each other. The First Nations people, were colonized by the Non-Natives, most often whites themselves. Native Canadians live with the legacy of having been colonized and their writings are an attempt to retrieve their past, where the past abuses form the structure of the present. Aboriginal writings-most often claimed as ‘postcolonial’ because they have been conquered and oppressed and their cultures marginalized- can therefore be termed as “the literature of the exploited” and can be equated with the postcolonial literature or subaltern literature since all are those of the “oppressed”. The linkage between gender and their racial/ethnic identities has been the subject of numerous writings by Native Canadian writers, negotiating the power relations. The main focus of the texts from the margins not only deals with national identities, but with the oppression at the hands of not just colonial powers but also patriarchy in native cultures. The ethnic identity is thus coupled with gender, patriarchy and the issues of sister-hood. Aboriginal writers, acting as the representatives of their community, display genuine compassion towards the ‘day-to-day social rape’ encountered by the natives. Tomson Highway, the much celebrated Native Indian writer, born in a Native Indian reserve in Northern Manitoba dons with the historical experiences of colonization and displacement. His cult play, *The Rez Sisters*, portrays a group of women putting aside their differences and travel to Toronto to participate in the world’s biggest bingo. This paper is an attempt to read this play through the prism of ethnic culture, identity, resistance and female survival.

Key words : Ethnic culture, Canadian Aboriginals, Women, Resistance, Identity.

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After the first moments of the white discovery of America, Canada and Australia, the indigenous people lost their lands. Though they were the first residents, colonization by the whites drove them into the interior or to their deaths. Today they live in ghettos or reservations.

Aboriginal and First Nations’ writing is an attempt to not only bring back their traditions but also to ensure that modernity, especially colonial modernity is revealed as an exploitative mechanism where some cultures have been marginalized or even eliminated. Aboriginal writings, drawing upon

oral traditions, native versions of spirituality and a land ethic that emphasizes the interconnections of all life, also foreground the dominations of white settlers, the exploitation of their lands and the suppression of their way of life. It celebrates its culture and tradition, most often focusing on the theme nature, expresses an anxiety about the loss of cultural specificity and cultural negotiations.

Today's much celebrated native Canadian writer Tomson Highway was born in 1951, as the son of a fisherman and was the 11th of the 12 children. After his education at the University of Manitoba, he devoted his life for seven years to work with Native Organizations in Ontario and Toronto which enabled him to travel extensively around Canada, within the Province of Ontario in particular and came into intimate contact with Native People in Reserves and the network of native lives and politics in this country. Tomson wrote his first plays while working with some Native theatre companies which were performed mostly to Native audiences on reserves and in urban community centers.

It was in December 1986, that *The Rez Sisters* hit the theatre, winning the playwright the Dora Mavor Award for the best new play in the same year. *The Rez Sisters* and its sequel *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* established his reputation quickly, by making him the famous Native Canadian writer in Canada today. In *The Rez Sisters*, a group of women put aside their differences and travel to Toronto to the world's biggest Bingo. In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, the men of the reserve confront their political impotence as first the women of the reserve, then all the aboriginal women of the world invade the men's domain and form a hockey league. Both plays refer to a cultural formation, subverting the accepted essential ethnic identity.

The Rez Sisters is set on the Indian reserve of Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin Island Ontario. A reserve is a tract of land for the exclusive use of 'bands' though not strictly owned by them. Highway presents the experience of seven native women each of them confronting with individual problems of Native Indian consciousness. These women belonging to different age groups, however, are related to one another in some way or the other.

Pelajia Patchnose aged 54, the eldest of them all, is dejected with the monotonous existence on the reserve. She dreams of having a shiny paved road on the reserve which will allow their people to drive to their place of work and prevent accidents. Blaming their leaders, she says:

And dirt roads! Years now that old chief's been making speeches about getting paved roads "for my people" and still we got dirt roads all over ... I'm gonna put that old chief to shame and build me a nice paved road right here in front of my house. Jet black. Shiny. (Highway 8)

Philomena Moosetail, sister of Pelajia, dreams of having an ultramodern toilet, "big and wide and very white" (5). She just wrestles with her existential angst and dreams only of winning the jackpot. This dream is evidently inspired from by a bowel problem and her sisters often tease this 'light hearted' woman about her frequency visits to the toilet. Their half sister Marie Adele Starblanket, the thirty nine year old, though suffers silently from cancer, dreams of making a comfortable home for her husband Eugene and her fourteen children in an island, where they can live "real nice and comfy". Annie Cook, her last sister is obsessed with music that she wishes to buy a record player and collect all the records of Pasty Cline. She also hopes to become a country singer and someday marry her boyfriend Fritz, a Jewish country singer. Emily Dictionary aged thirty two, the 'tough lady' of the group whose course language and rough exterior are the results of an abusive ten year old marriage and the death of a female lover in San Francisco. Veronique St Pierre, the sister-in-law of the others has the biggest dream of buying the biggest stove. Though complains about her alcoholic husband, she loves others and cares for their concern. Her longing for motherhood makes her adopt Zhaboonigan, the last of the seven women, a mentally retarded girl whose parents died in a car crash.

Certainly this is not a play about the social problems of Indians, but it tells the story of seven women and their dreams and fears. Highway avoids negative responses in this play and these native women reflect some of the problems of

their particular place in the contemporary society. Following *The Rez Sisters* Highway was widely praised for what a critic called, 'this extraordinary empathy' for women.

However, one of the major issues facing the aboriginal people, particularly women which affect their personal identity is the societal perception that they are licentious. This often leads to sexual harassment, assault or even as far as rape. There are irresponsible husbands like Veronique's and Emily's. While one wastes his money in drinking, the other even tries kill his wife with an axe. As for Marie Adele, her husband Eugene has become the cause of her mental agony. He fails to be a kind and loving husband to his wife. It was Eugene who disappointed Annie many years ago by preferring Marie Adele to her as his wife. Again Philomena was deserted by a white man after giving her a child. Aboriginal women most often encounter with the atrocities from white men that comes along with their skin tone. The present mental illness of Zhaboonigan may be traced to the brutal rape by two white boys who penetrated her vagina with a screwdriver when she was a small girl, as in her own words:

They ask me if I want a ride in car. Oh I was happy I said, "yup". Took me far away. Ever nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here ... It was a screwdriver ... The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold. (47-8)

Portraying Zhaboonigan with a broken memory and an unbroken image of a screwdriver, Highway obviously tries to show this object as a tool for oppression. Highway's insight about women comes from their fact of being oppressed both sexually and racially. Thus, these women occupy a margin within a margin. Highway's portrayal of men is often unfavorable as drunkards, womanizers, exploiters, indifferent and irresponsible husbands.

This cult text of Highway represents the traumatic events of the community which is both individual and communal. Thus the social construct of 'gender' obviously plays the crucial role in determining the fate of the female sex. All of them were silenced by the native culture which is as intact

as the colonized societies. Though men don't appear on the play, the unrepresented structures of patriarchy determine the fate of these women who are affected both by the native and the white men.

Several of the issues and ideas raised here have preoccupied with the question of identity. In particular, their identity is lying 'in-between', a position of the subordinate and their impartial perception of the world can be used as the starting point for creating new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models of 'Aboriginal Womanhood'. Many of these women in *The Rez Sisters* want to go beyond the borders, which are important thresholds, full of contradiction and ambivalence. They have a recognition that being inside this 'border' is to accept the venerable customs and the established norms and once they cross the boundaries, they can question, refashion or mobilize received ideas as for Pelajia says "I'm tired Philomena, tired of this place. There's days I wanna leave so bad ... Everyone here's crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush"(3-6). The identities of these women are presented as weakening or fading with their own inner tensions.

Etienne Balibar's essay 'Racism and Nationalism' makes a useful distinction between external and internal racism. External racism is a form of xenophobia, when groups of people who are located outside the borders of the nation are discriminated against on the grounds of their 'race'. Internal racism is directed at those who live within the nation but are not deemed to belong to the imagined community of the national people due to their perceived race. Internal racism can result in its most extreme and violent form in the extermination of racialised individuals or the oppression of racialised groups who are awarded a low position in the social hierarchy. Each and every women characters, frustrated with their own identity and existence want to go out of this static circumstances and to build up a new identity.

'Bingo' supplies the leitmotif of the play. News spread among the seven women that there is going to be the "biggest bingo in the world" in

Toronto and the prize is one million. They begin to patch up their dreams. As for Annie:

When I go to the Biggest Bingo in the world in Toronto, I will win. For sure, I will win ... Then it will take all my money and I will go to every record store in Toronto. I will buy every single one of Patsy Cline's records ... Then I will buy a huge record player. The biggest one in the whole world. (35)

And for Marie-Adele

When I win the Biggest Bingo in the world, I'm gonna buy me an island ... The most beautiful island in the world. And my island will have lots of trees – great big bushy ones – and lots and lots and lots of sweet grass ... My twelve Starblanket boys and my two Starblanket girls and me and my Eugene all living real nice and comfy right there on the Starblanket island. (36)

Veronique, who loves cooking, "will go shopping for a brand- new stove ... will cook for all fourteen children of Marie-Adele Starblanket and even for Gazelle Nataway's poor starving babies ... will write a cook-book called "The Joy of Veronique St.Pierre's Cooking" and will become rich and famous".(36-37)

From their ordinary desire to buy stove and record, to their goal of welfare measures for the reserves, they need money which they do not possess. They expect to make easy-money for their entire plan, by participating in the Biggest Bingo in Toronto. Though they are excited, the stark reality of poverty, on the reserve, makes them wonder how to raise the funds, to go to Toronto. The refusal of the bank official to fund them strengthens their spirits and they resolve all the more that they engage themselves into a number of burst activities like cleaning, baking, harvesting, entertaining and recycling. They rally their energies in order to rent a van to travel from the reserve to the big city. Bingo has a dual significance; first as a contemporary replacement for the traditional Native ritual and second as a symbolic escape from loneliness, poverty and dissatisfaction. During the journey, each one's bitter and tragic past comes out in long dramatic monologues.

The date of the Bingo, 8 September, reminds Philomena of the illegitimate child she had

on the same day years ago. Her work as a secretary in Toronto, her affair with white man, the unwanted pregnancy and the child born out of wedlock given away for adoption – all those memories come flashing back. Annie Cook's unhappy past consists of failure in love and the sense of outrage about the betrayal of her own sister Marie in snatching away her lover Eugene. The gossip of the other women constantly reminds Veronique of her barrenness and causes untold mental agony. Emily Dictionary relieves the unpleasant past of her ill-treatment at the hand of her former husband and the suicide of her lesbian lover and Marie Adele is going through physical agony due to cancer. All these when coupled with the rape Zhaboonigan received, accounts the ultimate agony both physical and mental women could undergo. The oppressive sad tales dampened their enthusiasm. To make matters worse, a flat tyre causes unnecessary delay and anxiety.

Overcoming all these hurdles, they reach Toronto with high expectations only to get disappointed, as they are not lucky enough to win anything in Bingo except Philomena who gets a paltry sum. In frustration and anger, the women go on a rampage and snatch the Bingo-machine and throw it away. The sickly Marie dances with the Bingo Master and dies in his arms thinking of him as Nanabush, the mythical spirit. In the introductory note to the *The Rez Sisters* Highway says that the Trickster spirit Nanabush regards human existence not as struggle for redemption but as a "joyous celebration".

The mainspring of the play Marie-Adele, whose fear, suffering and final ascension into the spirit world drive its events and character journeys. Marie Adele does not love Bingo for its own sake, as Annie and Philomena do, but for the dream which the grand prize might buy- an idyllic island home in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and their fourteen children. Her illness is also driving a wedge between her and Eugene, as she confides to Pelajia on their way to Toronto:

He doesn't talk, when something goes wrong with him, he doesn't talk, shuts me out, just disappears. Last night he didn't come home. Again it happened ... I can't

even have him inside me anymore. It's still growing there. The cancer. Pelajia, een-pay-see-see yan. [Pelajia, I'm scared to death]. (33)

However, Marie Adele comes to accept her own death in the same way that she accepted life, gently and with love. "Oh it's you, so that who you are... come... don't be afraid... come to me... ever soft wings..." (45).

The death of Marie Adele creates thorough change and generates ripples through most of the characters. Up to this point, for example, Veronique St. Pierre has shown herself to be a small-minded gossip frustrated by her own childishness. After Marie Adele dies, Veronique breathes life into her own dream by moving into the Starblanket home to take care of Marie-Adele's family. The hard working widower Eugene can provide all the things that Veronique's alcoholic husband cannot: a huge roast to cook, a good stove to cook it in, and a ready-made family that needs her love and care. Similarly Emily Dictionary seems an unappealing character when we first meet her. A coarse, tough, full-mouthed young woman recently comes home to 'the rez' from California. On the trip to the Bingo game, her character is revealed. Her former husband beat her viciously for ten years and her lesbian lover in San Francisco committed suicide. At the end of the play, it is revealed that Emily is pregnant from Big Joey the notorious Casanova of Wasaychigan Hill. The cycle is completed for Veronique and Emily who is transformed into a loving sister to Zhaboonigan and a loving mother to her baby. Though Philomena could not trace her child, she gets the bathroom she has always wanted. Annie Cook is hired by Katz Band to sing. Thus the death of Marie has taught them not to hitch their wagon high but to accept the present pragmatically. Thus without escaping into dreams and running to Toronto, they have learnt to face their problems and fight back.

Without hankering after unrealized dreams, the native women have come to terms with their 'self' and accepted the reality. With the bond among them tightened, they are ready to encounter the challenges of life. The recovery of the identity in itself is a remarkable achievement for the women

who had no solid support from their past on the fierce individualism and materialistic attitudes of the whites.

Highway's narrative calls attention to the experiences of women and record the exploitation of Aboriginal peoples and women by the native men and the white settlers. The text evidences what we have been calling the 'double colonization' of women on many occasions. Highway has constructed subservient roles and racialised identities building up an Aboriginal consciousness which does not change at the end but acquire new dignity. Highway's work must be located in the context of a world-wide awareness of the injustices done to the Aboriginals.

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