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## Acts of Surviving in Native Canadian Drama: A Feminist Reading of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*

Navya Chandran<sup>1</sup>

M.Phil Student, Sree Sankaracharya University, Kalady

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### ABSTRACT

The play *The Rez Sisters* is written by Tomson Highway, a Cree from the Brochet reserve in North-Western Manitoba, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Immediately after its publication, the play was labelled as “one of the most touching, exuberant, cleverly crafted and utterly entrancing plays” by the *Toronto Star*. Preserving the Native spirit becomes the major agenda behind Native writing. Tomson Highway has successfully portrayed the life in Wasy Reserve, although it specifically follows the life of the seven women. These highly individualised characters show specific traits that resist any attempts to essentialise them on any grounds. They are in constant struggle for survival, but they do it on their own, announcing it aloud that they need no assistance from the men around them. Highway even brings in the emotional bonding following a queer lesbian relationship. The power packed feminine portraits of Highway are one of its kind and it continues to enlighten the feminine images of Native women living in closed communities.

**Key words:** Canadian native American Literature, gender, struggle and resistance

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North American indigenous drama was in prominence long before the discovery and colonisation of the land by Europeans. It stood a class apart from the contemporary drama, being acted out by Shamans or mystics who were gifted actors who used masks, stage props and voice projection to perform with great skill. The rich and diverse genres of native drama included spirit plays and spirit dances, which can be considered as the forerunner of modern dramatic practices in Canada. The major themes of these plays were celebration of initiation, purification, death and resurrection that had close resemblance with ancient fertility cults. These plays were more ritualistic – meant to benefit the communities spiritually by influencing the weather or curing illness. The ancient North American indigenous drama hence has pagan origins.

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<sup>1</sup> Mail ID: [navyachandran1992@gmail.com](mailto:navyachandran1992@gmail.com)

Colonisation had adverse effects on this Native dramatic canon. After colonisation, no worthwhile theatre came into vogue in Canada. No English Canadian theatre as such gained in stature or strength at least until 1950. But then the Little Theatre Movement, Workers' Theatre Movement, Dominion Drama Festival gave necessary encouragement to the development of the Native Drama. However it was the formation of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932 that gave a fillip to the creation of a national character and identity for Canadian drama. From 1939, there was a steady growth in radio dramas. Only in the post – 1950s period, English Canadian drama came of age. It was the age of eminent dramatists like Robertson Davies, James Reaney, George Ryga, David French, Sharon Pollock and Tomson Highway who charted the future of Canadian drama.

Contemporary Native Canadian Theatre develops from the patterns followed before colonisation, brilliantly fusing mainstream and indigenous cultures. Playwrights like Tomson Highway are forced to appropriate the dramatic techniques of Euro-American postmodern theatre into the traditional sphere of ritual and storytelling. Highway practices bilingualism to strike a balance between the desire to express himself in his mother tongue Cree and the need for forced appropriation of the coloniser's language English, with a view to reach a larger audience. Highway uses Cree alongside English to reflect native cultural values in contrast to Christian Eurocentric values i.e. risible, sensual, genderless articulation as opposed to sombre, abstract and patriarchal discourse. The spirit of Native drama survives through his work through the repeated use of native idioms and native language. Furthermore, the play should be read in the light of its rich network of cross-cultural influences and dramatic techniques. It presents a variety of influences from Greek drama and Christian morality plays to innovative theatrical techniques such as the Brechtian alienation effect, used in the spotlight inner monologues in Act One.

Highway's highly acclaimed first production is *The Rez Sisters* that reflects the Native Cree spirit. As Renete Usminai comments: "*The Rez Sisters* consequently shares all the surface aspects of western postmodernism but differs essentially in spirit . . . the essential humanism, life – affirming and hopeful world view of Native people" (*Les Belles – Soeurs Vs. The Rez Sisters in Canadian Literature*. 127) in diametric opposition to the negativism, nihilism and the "Waste Land" like spiritual sterility of western postmodern society. The play was first performed in 1986 at the Native Canadian Center in Toronto by the Act IV theatre Company and Native Earth Performing Arts and it was immediately hailed as a cultural revolution and resulted in a change of nomenclature from colonial to independently assertive i.e. from 'Indian' to 'Native' or 'Aboriginal'.

*The Rez Sisters* is a two act play set in the fictional Wasychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. The diverse and unique characterisation of Tomson Highway brilliantly portrays seven women and a trickster figure Nanabush. The seven women are related to each other either by birth or by marriage. Pelajia Patchnose, Philomena Moosetail, Annie Cook, Marie – Adele Starblanket, Emily Dictionary, Veronique St. Pierre and Zhaboonigan Peterson decide to pool their resource and travel to Toronto, to try their luck at the Biggest Bingo Game in the world. Highway begins his work by elaborating the pitiable life of the women in the Reserve. As Highway indicates in his production notes to the play, the name of the Reserve "Wasychigan" means "window" in the Native language, Ojibway. The reserve

functions as a metonym for Native communities across the country that look out on the conspicuous indicators of an economically powerful White society and looking at its own signs of self-destruction and of self-preservation.

Highway's choice of an all female cast, as Renate Usmiani points out, "underlines the oppression of the respective societies and their desire for empowerment". *The Rez Sisters* offers an earthly comic vision of a world in which suffering is a daily reality, but by no means the primary one and in which sisterhood is powerful. The play is an introspective journey, peeling off the layers of the genocide and hegemonial experiences of native communities in a colonial historicity to the pre-contact mythopoeic - a core where there was no gendered hierarchy or hierarchical order among native women. Primordial Native domesticity functioned on a sisterhood consciousness. In the play's historical present, the same mythopoeia element is witnessed in the transitional awakening of *The Rez Sisters* primal sisterhood consciousness on which is based Highway's vision of the resurgence of natives.

As Highway explains in his work *Nanabush in the City*, "Legend has it that shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the Native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are the seventh generation. But before this can happen or the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed" (9). Highway's portrayal of the seven Rez sisters is to reveal the dignity, strength of character and human superiority of Native women or as Highway says to: "make the Rez cool, to show and celebrate why funky folk Canada's Indian people really are" (*The Rez Sisters*, 9). This stands diametrically opposite to the Euro American subversive and caricatural images of the "Injuns" and their subaltern existence on the reserve similar to that of the black people and their ghettos of Harlem and the Bronx in post colonial racist America.

The Wasychigan Hill Reseve in the play administered by a 'band' (organised by the State for administrative purposes) runs on a subsistence economy. The neglect and impoverishment as glaringly visible in Pelagia Patchnose sees it in the opening moments of the play. Being the eldest, she is well aware of the spiritual and social problems on the Rez, and considers the possibility of a revolution in which the white male authority of the church and state is overthrown. She is a moderate version of Mardi Gras in Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*. From her crow's nest, "away up here", fixing the roof of her house, hammering on new shingles with her silver hammer, symbolic of her assertive nature observes:

Sure as I'm sitting away up here on the roof of this old house, I kind of like it up here, though. From here, I can see half of Manitoulin Island on a clear day. I can see the chimneys, the top of apple trees, the garbage heap behind Big Joey's dumpy little house. I can see the seagulls circling over Marie-Adele's white picket fence. Boats on the North Chanel . . . I wish I was sailing somewhere. The mill at Espianola, a hundred miles away . . . and that's with just a bit of squinting. See? If I had binoculars, I could see the super stack at Sudbury. And if I were a superwoman, I could see the CN Tower in Toronto. All, but I'm just old Pelajia Rosella Patchnose and I'm here in plain, dusty boring old Wasychigan Hill . . . Wasy . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . nailing shining with my trusty silver hammer on the roof of Pelajia Rosella Patchnose's little two bedroom walfare house . . . (*The Rez Sisters*, 2)

Pelajia's state of dissatisfaction with the sorry state of affairs on the Reserve is starkly evident when she expostulates: "Everyone here's crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush. Moreover "the old stories" and "old language" are almost gone" (*The Rez Sisters*, 6) Pelajia focuses on positive indicators of survival and empowerment, regardless of its origins and she bullies and inspires the other six Rez sisters, all of whom struggle with ways to survive in a fragmented society. This indicator comes in the form of the biggest bingo game in the world which activates the sisters' long cherished dreams.

Each woman has her own dreams of winning the Jackpot and fulfilling their desires. Pelajia wants to build a nice paved road leading up to her house. Philomena hopes for a new toilet big and wide and very white. Marie Adele wishes for the most beautiful incredible goddamn island in the world for her family. Annie hopes for enough money to buy every single one of Patsy Cline's records and go to all the taverns and nightclubs in Toronto and listen to the live music. Veronique wants to own the biggest stove on the reserve and dreams of publishing a cook book, a best seller. But there is also a solemn side to their adventure to the city, to seek medical help for Marie Adele who is stricken with cancer and is slowly dying. This makes it clear that the women's lifestyles and thought processes are dictated by gross consumeristic and materialistic desires whose fruition is dreamed in winning the jackpot in the game which explains the pre-eminently psychological reality of Bingo in the lives of the women.

However, the sisters' linear materialistic self indulgences are primary tactics for psychological survival, providing a way of addressing physical needs and of ameliorating current living conditions. For instance, Pelajia the 'elder' wants a paved road leading right to her doorstep. The dreams of Pelajia are more difficult to fulfil. She is the natural leader of the group, a stern father figure in overalls brandishing her ever-present hammer. A sense of her own powerless and aimlessness in the community have brought on her current malaise to the point where she wants to abandon the reserve and move to Toronto. For Pelajia, the huge prizes in The Biggest Bingo Game in the world reanimate her dream of paving the roads on the reserve which would empower her leadership by demonstrating the wisdom of her proposals. In fact Highway had modelled her character on that of his mother Pelajia Philomena Highway.

The second sister Philomena conceals her misery behind a facade of exurbance. Thirty years ago, while she was employed as a secretary in Toronto's garment district, she was into an affair with a white married man with whom she had a child. Philomena had been forced to give up the child for adoption without even learning whether it's a boy or a girl. She lives with a wistful maternal longing for the child. Marie Adele, the third sister is stricken by ovarian cancer and is terribly anxious about the future prospects of her husband and children. She lives in the constant fear of death and wants to escape it somehow.

The story of Emily Dictionary is also sordid. She had suffered ten years of domestic violence and physical abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband followed by her brief association with a gang of Native lesbian bikers with whom she gets sexually intimate. The death of her lesbian partner brings her back to the Reserve, where she begins an affair with Big Joey. Her cyclical journey from being victimised to lesbianism and healing in relation to the Cree philosophy of life is a continuous cycle

– a self-rejuvenating force. The brutalities against Rez women are further expounded through the horrific description of Zhaboonigan's brutal rape by a gang of white boys. The retarded Zhaboonigan recollects the horrific rape in her crazy prattle with the seagull/Nanabush at a stage in the play when the other women are in a stage of anarchic conflict.

Pelajia wistfully longs for better living conditions and employment on the reserve the lack of which had forced her sons and husband to leave the Reserve and settle down in the city to earn their livelihood. She too wants to leave the Reserve. As a part of the larger theme there is also the Native love for the land which is one of the main issues of the play; how the culturally displaced Native women learn to respect their homeland and weather the challenges that make their lives difficult, rather than to migrate to the city. Philomena exhorts Pelajia: "This place is too much in your blood. You can't get rid of it. And it can't get rid of you"(4).

Veronique, although neglected and deserted by her alcoholic bootlegger husband takes a positive stand by adopting the retarded young woman Zhaboonigan, chaperoning her and takes charge of the deceased Marie Adele's family. Annie Cook's crush on Eugene and her unrequited love, her brief love affairs with Native men results in a prejudice she develops against them and an instant love for white men, especially with a Jewish country musician popular locally by the name Fritz the Katz. The Rez sisters' fiasco at the "BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" ending in Marie Adele's death dramatised in the Bingo scene i.e. the Bingo Master/Nanabush waltzing with Marie Adele and escorting her away brings them back to the reserve chastened, spiritually boded in the primordial sisterhood consciousness and their priorities set right.

In the beginning of the play, all the women are divided and unhappy. All the bickering and accusations among the characters comes into light when a full-scale riot breaks out and all the symptoms of the community's breakdown come out. The Rez women seem powerless with all their angry rush of words. The women throw acquisitions that bring about their true thoughts about each other. The bonding amongst the sisters becomes apparent when Marie-Adele begins to lose their strength after the fight and begins to collapse. All the duel stops and the sisters get concerned about the well being of Marie-Adele. This is the beginning of the reunification of their sisterhood. They also join forces over Emily's black eye, admonishing her to "use her brain" and stop all the affairs with Big Joey. Another major step in the sister's community development is the speculation over THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD! Annie Cook leads all the women in a "march" to the post office for confirmation of the news and after that the trip to Toronto is planned. So Bingo is the common goal of all the women that unites them.

As the sisters have no money to travel to Toronto, Pelajia suggests that they should apply to the band office to ask the chief for a loan to fund their trip because the winnings could go towards paving the roads and solving all the problems of the band. The "Grand and ridiculous march to the band office" is the women's first surge of communal energy and self-empowerment. Being refused any money by the chief, the women meet in Pelajia's basement to work it out on their own. They decide to borrow Big Joey's van, stay in a single room with Philomena's son; Emily and Annie can drive throughout the trip. The second surge of communal energy and self-empowerment to reach their goal is their efforts to raise funds. Throughout the act of

fundraising, Nanabush is watching over the women, adding the furious rush to succeed. Each woman does what she is capable of and helps each other to raise \$1493.65 in ten days. Pelajia does her “man” work of repairing things, Philomena baby sits, Annie and Emile sing, Marie Adele does laundry, Veronique bakes, Zha collets blueberries. Having reached their goal, the women begin their journey.

Big Joey’s van becomes the intimate travelling community as the women find emotional closeness in their physical closeness in the van. They share their real emotions and fears to each other. Marie Adele shares the fear of her children being forced apart and of what will become of her family after her death. By the time they reach Toronto, the women are empowered. They are taking responsibility of themselves and for each other. Their efforts in obtaining their material goals transformed into the spiritual needs they represented. As Veronique’s dream of possessing an ultramodern stove and publishing a bestselling cook book becomes a transformative reality when she moves into the deceased Marie Adele’s home, cooking and taking care of her husband and her fourteen children. Although only Philomena actually won money and reached her monetary goal, all the women came away richer in spirit for having found the power in themselves to succeed. The result is that the community is strengthened by the adversity and ready to face the future together.

In the play, Tomson Highway juxtaposes the cultural and spiritual values of Native and non-Native Canadians. Although there are some aspects of cultural accommodation and a positive integration of some of the materialistic products of a white capitalistic society, the negative consequences of cultural collision are played out in the lives of the women and men who constitute the Native community of Wasy Reseve. The people in the reserve face from a question of identity crisis. The survival and recuperation of sisterhood among native woman whose communities have been subjected to hierarchical divisions by the Eurocentric white patriarchal societies is stressed upon by Highway as the survival and development of Native societies in a multicultural frame work depends upon resurgence of their women.

The accomplishment of *The Rez Sisters* is that it focuses on a variety of such undervalued lives and brings them up to size. Against the backdrop of social depravity due to alcoholism, drug addiction, physical and emotional abuse and violence, psychological and social displacement and isolation, the seven women in the play, are not only survivors, but who with gusty humour and tenacious optimism envision a better world and the prosperity of their community. The play is noted for its farcical elements and open lyricism which functions as a catharsis of emotions, its chief function being to create an emotional rapport between the native characters of the play. Hence *The Rez Sisters* is undoubtedly a pot-pourri of native and foreign cultures, beautifully fusing to give out fragrance of Reserve life.

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NAVAJYOTI, VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2, FEB 2017