

# Native Theatre: An Expression of the Unexpressed Cree Culture in Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*

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Abstract Native Theatre is a separate field with distinct dramaturgy that illuminates Native culture, thoughts and pattern of life. It is an apt stage for expression of Native authored dramatic works. It is weaved for both Native and Non-Native audience: as an expression for the former and as an eye-opener for the latter. Tomson Highway, a Native playwright from Canada, has contributed remarkably for the growth and popularity of Native Theatre. He has imbibed drama as the best genre for explicating indigenous lives on reserves in Canada. His play *The Rez Sisters* serves as his mouthpiece to bring Native thoughts on stage and take audience to Native world. No italics, 10 size font, bold. Abstract should not be more than 200 words (The abstract should not exceed 250 words. It should briefly summarize the essence of the paper and address the following areas without using specific subsection titles.):

**Keywords** — Cree, Indigenous Literature, Native Culture, Native Theatre, Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*

## I. INTRODUCTION

By Native theatre, I mean theatre that is written, performed, and produced by Native people themselves and theatre that speaks out on the culture and the lives of this country's Native people

- Tomson Highway

Native mythology was passed down from generation to generation in the form of oral tradition through Native languages like Cree, Ojibway, and Mohawk. After colonization, especially in later part of twentieth century, considerable number of Native playwrights has brought their mythology for public consumption. Lynn Riggs' *Cherokee NiGht* is now considered to be the first and one of the most influential examples of modern American Indian theatre and dramaturgy. *Cherokee NiGht* explores issues concerning the Cherokee people: the extreme racism inflicted upon full and mixed blood Cherokees on Oklahoma, the displacement of American Indians from their ancestral lands, and the eradication of Native Indians and languages.

## II. TOMSON HIGHWAY - NATIVE THEATRE- *THE REZ SISTERS*

Tomson Highway, the Cree playwright of *The Rez Sisters* was born in 1951 on a remote island in Northwest Manitoba, Canada. His plays are noted for his depiction of beliefs, traditions, and life issues of people living on

reserves in Canada. He is the president of Native Earth Performing Arts, a professional Native American theatre company in Toronto. He has served as a producer, actor, stage manager and also as a playwright. His Native Earth Performing Arts Company is dedicated to the development of Native Dramatic art. Highway finds out the reason for choosing drama instead of any other genre as the medium of expression and says in his lecture *On Native Mythology*:

In a sense, it's like taking the "stage" that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transporting it- using words, actors, lights, sound – onto the stage in a theatre. For me, it is really a matter of taking a mythology as extraordinary and as powerful as the human imagination itself and reworking it to fit, snugly and comfortably, the medium of the stage. (1)

Highway has been awarded eight honorary degrees from various universities. In 1994, he became a member of the Order of Canada. In 2001, he received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the field of arts and culture. His two-act play *The Rez Sisters* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award as well as the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award in 1987 and was nominated for the Governor's Award for English language drama in 1988. In 1989, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, a sequel play to *The Rez Sisters* was published. In 2000, *Rose* a third play in Tomson Highway's planned heptalogy was

written featuring characters from both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In 2005, he wrote *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* reflecting on the historical visit of the then Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier to the Thompson River Valley.

Tomson Highway, like many other Native playwrights preferred theatre to stage his Native ideologies since only drama can best reflect Native culture that includes dance and song. George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* can be said to have given a new turn to social view on Aboriginals. Until and before 1960s, Aboriginals and their problems were least bothered of and were projected as avarice and drunken characters. Thanks to the emergence of Native theatres in Canada, Native people's problems were recognized through stage representations. Among such dramatic and pioneer representations, Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* also deserves its lion's share. The place of action in the *The Rez Sisters* dwells on the imaginary Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve. Highway himself has given a note that the word 'Wasaychigan' means 'window' in Ojibway. He might have used the name to symbolise the way of understanding how the reserve looks at the outer world and also how it acts as a sample to discern the life pattern of the Natives in reserves.

Highway's personal experience as a First Native writer has given a huge hit to *The Rez Sisters* that dramatizes the hopes and perseverance of seven female protagonists on a fictional Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve. Having been born and raised within the boundaries of the reserve, these seven Cree women- Pelajia, Philomena, Marie- Adele, Annie, Emily, Veronique, and Zhaboonigan crave for a better life by winning the world's biggest Bingo game to be held at Toronto. During the game, Marie- Adele dies. The women, unfortunately, do not win the big jackpot. However, Philomena and Veronique win a portion of money which they use for what they wished at the beginning of the play - buying her a toilet, and Veronique, a stove.

First peoples naturally live a life concomitant to maintaining equality among themselves. Tomson Highway has symbolized this Native consciousness in his play *The Rez Sisters* by adopting no single central character. All are given equal importance encircling variegated stories for each woman.

All the women characters in *The Rez Sisters* feel spiritually void in their lives after the colonial influence on their culture. In spite of their nostalgic longing for the past, their culture within helps them become self-assertive and resilient to western civilization. This resistant as well as resilient power of sisters in *The Rez Sisters* reflects upon the admirable heritage of Native culture. The desire of Native women in *The Rez Sisters* for empowerment

underlies the oppression of the treasure house of Native culture by Western ideologies.

Tomson Highway enumerates three main traits of his language and says that they are absent in English since English voices for Western culture. Firstly, Cree is hilarious. Funny and boisterous characteristics overwhelm sombre and tragic feelings throughout the play. Similarly, Cree people too, in real life love to lead a happy life in funny mode rather than serious and moody life style. Even their sorrows and tragedies are draped in joy and happiness.

Secondly, Cree is visceral in such a way that bodily functions are openly discussed. For example, Philomena throws "the toilet door open, sits there in her glory, panties down to her ankles" (*The Rez Sisters* 43). Pelajia says "Philomena. Get your bum out here. Veronique St. Pierre is about to lose her life" (43).

Finally, Cree is quite surprisingly genderless. Trickster figure, Nanabush, which is important as Christ is to Western culture, is genderless and picks up different roles as a Seagull, a nighthawk and the bingo-master. In *Comparing Mythologies*, Tomson Highway observes:

There is, for one thing- and most importantly- no concept of gender in the Cree language. In that language, we are all, in a sense, he/shes, trees are he/shes, ocelots are he/shes, budgie-birds in cages are he/shes, even rocks on the beaches of Rio are he/shes. And God -most essentially is one big fat he/she. (40-41)

Native mythology of Cree and Ojibway people is both alive and electric though being magical. The trickster figure Nanabush is actually played by a male dancer and it adopts three guises of a white sea-gull, a black bird, and a bingo master. His first appearance is outside Marie-Adele's house and then it accompanies the seven sisters on their march towards the store, to the band office. He playfully joins the scene of fund-raising efforts. Zhaboonigan chooses Nanabush for sharing her traumatic childhood experience.

Don't fly away. Don't go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. (47-48)

In the Bingo- scene, it is Nanabush in the form of a black bird who comes to take her away beyond this world: "Come.....come....don't be afraid....as-tum..come..to...me... ever soft wings...beautiful soft...soft... dark wings..here...take me...as-tum...as-tum"(104).

Out of the above explained two scenes, it is deduced that Zhaboonigan finds the trickster figure as her confidant to give vent to her unpleasant experience. Marie- Adele who

has been suffering from cancer and is not willing to face death and leave back her family uncared of, but she, too, at the bingo riot scene, collects herself to face death which has come to take her away in the form of a night-hawk. The trickster instills hope and joy in mentally suffering Zhaboonigan whereas the same trickster drives away fear and life-threatening worries from the timid Marie- Adele and sows mental courage and fearless attitude in her to bid adieu to her life on the earth.

Natives consider circle as a symbol of life circle. Tomson Highway, under the influence of Native circle, has dramatized the last scene at the place of Palajia's roof top where the drama's opening scene is also situated.

### III. CONCLUSION

In sum, the point to be recorded is that Tomson Highway, being the son of the soil of Canada, has best delineated in *The Rez Sisters* the cultural solidarity of Cree tribes in Canada during 1980's and has emerged successfully being capable of crafting Native thoughts suitable to stage.

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