



Sexual Harassment of Aboriginal Women in George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*

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Abstract

George Ryga is one of the prominent English playwrights who has an esteemed place in the history of Canadian literature. He addresses issues relating to Aboriginal people in his country. The play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is considered as a landmark in Canadian literature as Sally Morgan's *My Place* is in Australian literature because it was one of the first literary genres which discuss issues relating to Aboriginal people which earlier never found place in the Canadian literature. The play structured in two acts recounts the story of Rita Joe, a young Aboriginal woman, her struggle for survival in a completely adverse atmosphere. She belongs to a city where there is a monopoly of Whites and her tribe (Blacks) is being discriminated because of the color of their skin. The play is about the oppression of colonial power and the survival strategies of the natives. Through this play, Ryga has given voice to the voiceless and has been successful in his attempt in portraying the problems of the Aboriginals in Canada in the best possible way. He has taken the human experience with a fine sense of compassion in dealing with the issue.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, racism against Aboriginals, women victims, Canadian literature.

Introduction

The play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* tells the story of a young Aboriginal (native) woman who is a victim of the crime of White patriarchal society. She and her boyfriend, Jamie Paul had to face difficult situations throughout their lives because of their race. They are not able to live their lives as per their wishes but are forced to adapt themselves as per the requirements of white society in the city who consider them as animals. In the beginning of the play, we see that though being innocent, Rita is made guilty in front of the magistrate who sentences her to thirty days in prison.

The plot of the play is woven in a dream-like scenes, where, on the one hand, mostly dialogues between Rita and the important people in her life (representing her past), and, on the other hand, between Rita and the Magistrate (representing her present) alternate. The final scene of the play is very tragic as we witness the death of Jamie and Rita at the hands of the Murderers in a very heinous way. Their atrocity did not end here as the murderer performs necrophilic rape as the dead Rita Joe lies still. The story conveys the

cruelty of White society towards those who are unable to cope with its demands. The playwright has taken native Canadian characters that are under-privilege and are suffering day and night due to the marginalization by the people who considered themselves as superior race.

In the story, we see the marginalization of many native characters at different levels especially of the female protagonist, Rita Joe. There are different situations and places where she had to face injustice being a woman of inferior race as considered by the white society. There are places like Court, Police Station, School Premises, place of work, neighbourhood and Church. In all these places Rita Joe, Jamie, her father, sister and other native Canadian characters are marginalized and are force to live in a state of despair even resulting in the death of Rita Joe and Jamie Paul. Rita Joe and other native characters are bound to live a life of despair and humiliation in the land which is their own by the people who are settlers. This state of despair is also experienced by Chicano writer, Lorna De Cervantes who is a Mexican American Writer and forced to believe as alien in her own land. She expresses her grief in her poem, '*Refugee Ship*' when she says:

My reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.
I feel I am a captive aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.

The personal grief summed up in the above lines is not only the grief of the poet alone but she shares the grief of millions of people who are forced to live a life of subaltern in their own country.

In the opening scene of the play, we see the place of Justice, court where Rita Joe is brought, being charged in a false case by the two policemen. In the court the Magistrate gives her sermon:

To understand life in a given society, one must understand laws of
that society. All relationships..., Man to man... man to woman...
man to property, man to the state... freedom that was yours today.
Your home and well-being were protected. (17)

This speech is very ironical in the sense that the native people in the Canadian society were deprived of many things. They didn't had freedom to speak and their lives were not protected. They were always in the threat of being persecuted, we see Rita Joe as a big example of it. She was working in a whiteman's tire company and one day while returning late in the evening from her workplace she was trapped by the policeman who arrested her, gave money and presented in the court as a prostitute. She was accused of vagrancy by the Magistrate. The false charge which was imposed on Rita Joe is not only a single case but thousands of innocent native girls are being persecuted daily just

because they belong to race which is inferior in the eyes of White society. Rita repudiates in the court and so is reminded by the Magistrate that she has to bring some good witness within 8 hours to prove her good character in front of court. This is an impossible fact because she is aware of the fact that no English man/woman will support her.

Her witnesses being all white like the Priest of the Church, school teacher, school board clerk, English postman gave vouch against her and didn't certify her as a good character lady but accused her of many other guilt. Father, who is a Priest tried to molest her through a drama when he came to see her in prison but she was able to defend herself. He gives her cigarettes and a match box which is a violation of prison regulation. Showing interest in her, he tells her that he will help her in all possible way, he'll try to meet the warden. He tells her, "City is not place for you nor for me" (p. 82) for which she never agrees. He tries to possess her, "I worry about you I baptized you... I watched you and Leenie grow into women" (83) but she doesn't listen to him. When he finds that he is unable to brainwash her because she is not a loose character woman than he gets angry as says, "You' re not the woman I expected you to be... Your pride, Rita... your pride... may bar you from heaven!" (83). Then she recalls, what her uncle Dan Joe told when he was in his death bed to her:

Long ago the white men came with Bibles, to talk to my people,
who had the land. They talk for hundred years.... then we had all
the Bibles, an' the white man had our land..." (84)

The White community exploited the blacks through the means of religion by telling about religion; by giving Bibles, they took away the land of Indians. She tells this to the Priest but he tells her, "Don't blame the Church! We are trying to help..." (84). He tries his level best to convince her but she rejected him because of his evil intentions. When Rita Joe was sent to prison for a crime which she didn't commit. Then seeing the pathetic condition of prison, she openly criticizes:

There was no windows... The jail stinks! People in jail stink like
paper that's been in the rain too long. But a jail stinks worse. It stinks
of rust." (23)

So though being a marginalized character, she protests against the injustice meted out to her. Boire's opinion about the play is that, "the trial is an appropriate trope with which to dramatize colonizing encounters and their harsh legacies" ("Tribunations" 9). Boire believes that *The Ecstasy* is "typical of virtually all anti-authoritarian trial plays" (9). We witness an "irreconcilable" dialogue between Rita and the Magistrate, an "irresistible sentencing" in which Rita is the victim and the audience emerges as the central defendant (12). The Magistrate who gives justice but being a white colonist is

full of prejudices against the native aboriginals. He suggests to Rita that she return to her reserve, which is "her place," thereby illustrating the typical white person's inability to understand the Native. The Magistrate goes so far as to ask her to change her hair, her pronunciation, even her name, telling her: "This is not the reservation, Rita Joe. This is another place, another time..." (Ryga 38). But, Rita refuses to assimilate. Here it seems that there is clash of two cultures but not absolutely as the white culture is completely dominant over black. He also accuses her of being a mother of an illegitimate child because once he saw her with a little girl. This was shocking to her because the little girl happened to be her younger sister, Eileen Joe.

Later in the story when her sister comes to the city leaving her reserves to make her career but she was not able to establish herself. She wanted to become a dressmaker but being a native she didn't received any tailoring work as nobody gave her considering her as an inferior being. Her high expectations about the city proved to be mere illusions. Being frustrated she had to return to her reserve to serve her father in catching fish and cutting pulpwood.

When Rita is arrested again and appears before Magistrate in her fourth trial, he reads, "This is the seventh charge against you in one year... Laws are not made to be violated... Why did you steal?" (48) She quips, "I was hungry, I had no money..." (48) "I stole a sweater... They caught me in five minutes!" this she did it being a victim of circumstances. But the Policemen and Magistrate didn't understand this and charged her to be a trouble maker. The Policemen tell about her in the court that:

She was born and raised on a reservation. Then came a brief period in a public school off the reservation... at which time Rita Joe established herself as something of a disruptive influence." (49)

At one place though Magistrate sympathize her but that is momentarily, he says to her, "The Magistrate as though with a touch of compassion entreats, her "Look at you, woman! Each time you come before me you are older."(50) Behind this he means that she is a woman who has physical relations with many men. He doesn't listen her plea to go home as her father is sick but accuses her of carrying venereal diseases. He tells her:

There are people like that.... They cannot come into contact with others without infecting them. They cannot eat from dishes others may use.... They cannot prepare or touch food others will eat... The same with clothes, cars, hospitals, beds! (58)

At her workplace, Rita Joe had to face many difficult situations. Though her white boss, Steve Laporte gave her job, it is not out of real sympathy for her. He tried to molest /

corner/ marginalize her but she escaped from it wisely. He tells the Magistrate, I gave her a job in my tire store... took her over to my place after work once... She was scared when I tried a trick... Well, Sir, she took the money, then she stood in front of the window, her head high an' her naked shoulders shakin' like she was cold... She cried a little an' then she says, "Goddammit, but I wish I was a school teacher..." (46).

In her childhood, when she was a girl of four years old, their neighbor Sandy Collins, the owner of a sawmill, came to their house and tells her father:

My little Millie got a cough last night an' today she's dead. David Joe... Look, you got another kid coming... Won't make much difference to you. Sell me Rita Joe like she is for a thousand dollars!" (73).

He tries to convince Rita's father David Joe by giving him various offers, as he says:

Not a Thousand cash at once... First I give you two hundred and fifty dollars... when Rita Joe comes ten years old and she's still alright, I give you the next two hundred and fifty ... An' if she don't die by fifteen, I guarantee you five hundred dollars cash at once" (73).

This is the attitude and thinking of Whites towards native Canadians as they consider them no less than an animal ready to buy anytime. Her father being a man of self-respect and pride didn't sell her.

Rita Joe, though struggling in such an adverse situation but is fortunate to have Jaimie Paul in her life who is her biggest support and hence she is able to survive against all odds and adversities of her life. When Magistrate sentences Rita Joe for thirty days in prison in a fake case, he is outburst in front of him, "Teach me who I really am! You've taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man!" (111) For this, the Magistrate tells him,

There is room for dialogue. There is room for disagreement and there is room for social change... but within the framework of institutions and traditions in existence for that purpose." (111)

At the end of the novel, when the three murderers hover over them, Jamie tells her not to be scared. He tried hard to defend Rita Joe by attacking them but was killed by the three murderers. They grabbed Rita and tried to rape her, who being devastated and shocked by Jaimie's dead is not able to free herself from their control and in this attempt she dies. Her last words were "Jamie! Jaimie! Jaimie" (124). Seeing her condition, two of them ran away but the third murderer indulges in necrophilic rape. In this way, two native aboriginals became victim of white crime. The play, *The Ecstasy of*

Rita Joe strikingly presents the societal pressures which threatened the lives of the poor native Indians in Canada and how Rita Joe, David Joe and Jaimie Paul try their level best to liberate themselves from it. The play is about "the majority's oppression efforts and the minority's survival efforts" (Balachandran. 267). Robert Crew says:

In fact what is at trial here in the Whiteman's treatment of native Indians and by extension any dominant majority's treatment of a disadvantage minority group." (65)

James Barber has a very critical view as he writes, "George Ryga has painted a simple, disturbing picture of life without dignity and without hope" (57).

By writing this play, Ryga has become a social physician. He is a dramatist with much social concern. Jack Richards opines,

Ryga does not preach. He does not paint either side with the colours of martyrs or saints. He says only that there are two worlds in our society and neither understands, nor accepts the other." (56).

Each society whether is of Settlers or of natives should understand and respect other culture and societies. But being colonial powers, the mindsets of White community in the olden days was very negative. They always looked down upon the black race as inferior, uncultured and uncivilized who should be kept under control. This mindset is the reason for the racial discrimination which existed some years back and is still present in some societies. Nathen Cohen has aptly judged Ryga and says that:

The only thing real in the entire performance is the author's sense of outrage. Clearly he feels that Indians are harshly treated, and society is insensitive to its crime or to its need to make expiation." (p.58)

The play is admirable in the attempt that it has confronted readers to the plight of the native aboriginal Canadian people especially women and the responsibilities of the Canadian society upliftment of the aboriginal people particularly women because they suffered most. So in this way it has raised consciousness towards a community whose voices were unheard earlier as nobody tried to focus on it. The play has "touched off a Canadian cultural fervent that still continues today" (Jamie Portman. 65). Ryga is successful in his attempt to awaken the conscience of Canadian in particular and all oppressive forces in general.

In the play, the writer has presented a fragmented society suffering from racial prejudices and cultural losses by adopting different perspectives and tones and conveying various messaging regarding the plight of Aborigines. The play, *The Ecstasy*

of *Rita Joe*, is a modern trial play about a young Native woman who is alienated both from the reserve and city life. Through her character, Ryga conveys a critical and pessimistic outlook about Native's hopeless situation as Rita is trapped by the white colonialist insensitivity. Heather Robertson says:

"The play's social significance is pretty chilling – an Indian girl who is convicted of prostitution, raped and killed could be appalling." (63)

Ryga has told the story by using songs, montages and tableaux to make it interesting. Though the causes of the plight of Aboriginal people are not shown in sharp relief, it is clear that the violence of white culture and the patriarchy of Native culture are at the root of the problem. *The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia* which calls the play "seminal in the history of Canadian theatre," considered it to be more historically significant than meritorious in its own right:

[It is] not great for what it is as much as it is great for what it promises and what it offers the imaginative creative team... flashes of dramatic brilliance and also the historical aspect of the work's timing; this was one of the first works about Native Canadians mounted on a stage and taken seriously.

Now if we discuss about sexual harassment or molestation than the point is clear that is an issue of grave concern which is not confined to any particular society but an issue of grave concern in the global scenario. The paper is about subjugation of an aboriginal woman, Rita Joe at various places like school, workplace, in the police station, at court. It discusses how racism has affected the lives of people especially women. Though women have been subjugated in all the societies but if a woman belongs to an inferior race than she suffers badly. Though being a member of White society, Ryga has shown a humanitarian approach to the situation. It is obviously just the kind of disruptive influence which the readers keep forever. In my paper, I have tried to highlight the plight of aboriginal women especially the sexual harassment which Rita Joe has experienced throughout her life as Ryga has depicted in his play.

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