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## A Postcolonial Study of *The Rez Sisters* and *Rose* by Native Canadian Playwright Tomson Highway

**Sonia Sharma**

Ph.D. Scholar,  
Department of English,  
Jammu University.

Colonizers have long been tried to crush the spirit of the Indian people and blunt their will to resist colonization. One of the most devastating weapons of conquest has been sexual violence. Gender Politics fused with colonialism has been presented by many writers. Canada is a country where Aboriginal women frequently experience challenges and discrimination. They have been described as facing a “double-burden” – that for being discriminated against as a women, and further for being Aboriginal.

This paper gives an insight into the lives of the Aboriginal women of Canada that have been doubly marginalized with respect to Tomson Highway’s plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Rose* from *The Rez Septology*. The plays are discussed with the perspective of Postcolonial feminism. It posits in particular the dual theme of “native colonization” and “gender violence”. Tomson Highway has been called the most important new Canadian playwright to emerge in the latter half of 1980’s.

*The Rez Sisters* portrays the women with shattering images and as a victim of both the male dominating society and the system. It represents the odyssey of the seven women from an Indian Reserve to Toronto to participate in “The Biggest Bingo in the World” so as to fulfill their individual dreams. The seven women are related to one another by birth or marriage. Besides the seven sisters, the play also features a trickster Nanabush, who represents the native mythology. The life of the seven sisters is full of several hardships. They encounter social ills like poverty, sexual violence, boredom and ennui. They crave for life of comfort and a sense of belonging. By escaping to Toronto they wish to create a healthy environment both for themselves and their children. The Play *Rose* forms the third part of the *Rez Septology*. It is a sequel to *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. It features ten female and seven male characters including the characters from *The Rez Sisters* showing further development in their lives. It represents women in entirely different light. They are shown more assertive and empowered raising their voice against the violence and discrimination faced by their community and themselves as being women. They want to get back their land and revive old values.

This paper discusses Tomson Highway’s plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Rose* from *The Rez Septology* with the perspective of Postcolonial feminism. Tomson Highway has been called the most important new Canadian playwright to emerge in the latter half of 1980’s. *The Rez Septology* is a cycle of seven plays which after twenty years of the publication of *The Rez Sisters* is still in

progress. It talks about the native sufferings owing to the discriminatory policies of the Canadian government and posits in particular the dual theme of “native colonization” and “gender violence”.

The plays depict the miserable plight of the aboriginal people living in the Indian Reserves, thereby women in particular who, as Highway says, represent the social class. *The Rez Sisters* portrays the women with shattering images and as a victim of both the male dominating society and the system. It represents the odyssey of the seven women from an Indian Reserve to Toronto to participate in “The Biggest Bingo in the World” so as to fulfill their individual dreams. The seven women are related to one another by birth or marriage. Besides the seven sisters, the play also features a trickster Nanabush, who represents the native mythology. The life of the seven sisters is full of several hardships. They encounter social ills like poverty, boredom and ennui. They crave for life of comfort and a sense of belonging. By escaping to Toronto they wish to create a healthy environment both for themselves and their children. Carol Bolt, one of the critics, writing in *Books in Canada* called the play a “free wheeling, unforgettable journey in terrific company, the Rez Sisters, all of them full of energy and honesty and dreams and life.”

The Play *Rose* forms the third part of the *Rez Septology*. It is a sequel to *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. It features ten female and seven male characters including the characters from *The Rez Sisters* showing further development in their lives. It represents women in entirely different light. They are shown more assertive and empowered raising their voice against the violence and discrimination faced by their community and themselves as being women. They want to get back their land and revive old values. In the play Highway indeed has presented the colonial discourse fused with gendered questions.

As this chapter focuses on these two plays of Highway from the perspective of Postcolonial feminism, it addresses the predicaments of socially marginalized aboriginal women in a Postcolonial environment. The major issues of Colonialism like Racism, Cultural Conflict and its ill effects on all socially marginalized women become the intrinsic part of analysis. The chapter takes into account the key issues of Sexual Violence and Oppression, Racism, Cultural loss, Indian Reserves and Women Empowerment. In this context Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park argues:

Postcolonial feminism cannot be regarded simply as a subset of postcolonial studies, or, alternatively, as another variety of feminism. Rather it is an intervention that is changing the configuration of both postcolonial and feminist studies. Postcolonial feminism is an exploration of and at the intersections of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights (qtd. in *International Journal of English and Literature Vol. 4*).

The plight of Aboriginal women in Canada goes well with Postcolonial feminism. Since women in Highway’s plays stand for the Native class, the ill effects of Colonialism together with

gender issues are discussed in accordance. Highway has fused Colonial discourse with the question concerning women's identity which the Postcolonial feminists are also asking for. Postcolonial feminists question and condemn the Postcolonial discourse for ignoring women issues. The Aboriginals in Canada are persistently being pestered by the White Canadian Government with its Colonial policies and women in particular are getting most affected.

Postcolonial feminists seek to give voice to the non-Western women oppressed in the Postcolonial society and argue for women emancipation. Some of the few Postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Uma Narayan, Sara Suleri, Lata Mani, Kumkum Sangari and Taslima Nasrin have brought the feminist issues to the fore front. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes" strongly condemns the false representation of postcolonial women as victimized, ignorant, poor and uneducated arguing that such type of discourse forms stereotypes about the non-Western women and they are evaluated according to these stereotypes. Human rights activist Elsie B. Redbird argues, for example, that stereotyping, misconceptions and abuse of Indian women come from the fact that they were not allowed to speak for themselves, express their own identities or participate in the development of policies which affected them. Andrea Smith makes a similar point when she states that gender justice is often articulated as being a separate issue from issues of survival for indigenous people.

Uma Narayan in "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspective from a Nonwestern Feminist" aims to retrieve a sense of identity and place to women. Gayatri Spivak in her essays chiefly "Can the Subaltern speak" and "Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism" gives voice to the oppressed and doubly marginalized women, urging them to raise their suppressed voice and speak for themselves. Postcolonial feminists are closely linked with the Black feminists addressing the issues of 'Womanism' and demanding recognition. By giving voice to the oppressed and doubly marginalized in their writings the Postcolonial feminists purport to emancipate and empower the socially marginalized women. Tomson Highway in the two plays under study is also trying to give voice and emancipate the Aboriginal women undergoing double marginalization. Not only Highway but many other Native writers like Lee Maracle, Marilyn Dumont, Maria Campell etc. have also discussed the issues of Colonialism, Racism and Sexism, and are striving to restructure the stereotypical misrepresentations by writing back to the dominant group.

The Aboriginal women in Canada face oppression and violence and very often suffer discrimination. Colonialism in Canada is still maintained in the form of Violence and Oppression and especially women are getting most affected. Women in Postcolonial society, as Mohanty argues, suffer double Colonization, firstly as a colonized subject and secondly being women. Highway also argues about the double marginalization of the women of his community. Violence and Oppression against women in Native Canada is undoubtedly a Colonial construct because Native societies were matrilineal. Before Colonial encounter, women in Aboriginal societies

were respected. There was no gender discrimination; both men and women had their respective roles in society and there existed a balance between men's and women's roles. Aboriginal women of pre-colonial period could hold positions of power and leadership in their community. Women can do men's work and vice-versa.

But as the European arrived they brought with them the Colonial culture of Patriarchy and created a divide between men-women relationship. Colonization replaced the matrilineal status of the Native communities with patriarchy. Scholars Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzak pointed at the transformation of Indigenous societies due to Colonial encounter which has diminished Indigenous women's power, status and material circumstances. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that Colonialism, Racism and Sexism have objectified and marginalized the Aboriginal women from the mainstream society and within their own society as well.

The Aboriginal women in Canada are facing discrimination because of Colonial policies. The Aboriginal women are seen as a sexual deviant in Canadian society; which indeed has become a myth in contemporary Canadian society. Highway has deftly portrayed the evil consequences of Racism and Sexism owing to Colonialism. Both the plays give thrilling and breathtaking account of women Violence. The rape of Zhaboonigan, mentally disabled daughter of Veronique in the play *The Rez Sisters* is one of the most atrocious examples of sexual violence. She was sexually abused by two white boys. The two white boys take her on a long drive and after raping, left her alone in the bush in extreme cold.

'Rape' indeed has got metaphorical connotation. Zhaboonigan represents Native culture or Mother Earth while the two white boys represent white patriarchal culture. The white patriarchal father has raped the Native Mother Earth. It represents western domination. Ann Laura Stoler, argues, "sexual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker" (*Carnal* 45). Sara Suleri, the Postcolonial Feminist visualizes rape as the tool of Colonialism. Suleri argues that she intends to deconstruct the racially encoded positions which have become embedded in the very framework of postcolonial feminist theory.

By portraying the rape of Zhaboonigan, Highway indeed intends to highlight the injustice done to many other Native girls like her. Her rape parallels the rape of young Native girl Helen Betty Osborne that took place in small town in Manitoba, early in the morning of November 13, 1971, which indeed serves as a source for the present situation. Osborne was 19 years old Indian high school girl from Norway House Reserve. She was abducted and brutally killed with a screw driver. She was gang raped and stabbed 52 times by a screwdriver and was left to die. Only one of the four accused was tried and given very light sentence. Misrepresentations about the Native women aid such type of sexual violation. As said by Catherine Martin, "the fact that we [Native women] have been raped tends to make them [mainstream society] think that we are easy. It is a way to excuse the rapist, or to ignore the race issue" (qtd. in *A Recognition of Being*110). Similar type of rape is also described by George Ryga in his landmark work *The Ecstasy of Rita*

*Joe*, wherein the victim is again a Native girl named Rita Joe who is been raped and screwed brutally by white men.

Zhaboonigan was left with nothing after her sexual assault. She was not respected even by her own community. She was addressed as “Needle” which means “Going through things”, something sharp has gone inside her thus pointing at her rape. Her mother (Veronique) says: “They laugh at Zhaboonigan Peterson because she’s crazy, that’s what they call her. They can’t even take care of their own people, they’d laugh at them.” (Highway 26)

Emily Dictionary endured ten years of abuse by her husband, who mistreated her and tried to kill her. She was left pregnant by Big Joey, because of him and Gazelle Nataways, Big Joey’s girlfriend that she lost her baby in the belly. Philomena was also one of the victims of white patriarchal society. She was ditched by her boss. He was a married man and left her in a pregnant condition and walked out with his wife. She was forced to get rid of her child. She exclaims, “He liked me, Treated me like a queen. Loved me ... Got pregnant anyone. Blond, blue-eyed, six foot two. And the way he smelled God! His wife walks to us”. (81)

She presently has no idea about her child doesn’t even know whether her child is a “boy or a girl” (ibid). Both Emily and Philomena are victims of White society. Philomena’s separation from her child signifies cultural loss. In the play *Rose* she is further depicted as brutally beaten by sticks, stones and fists by five men while she was carrying the headdresses.

Emily gives an extensive and chilling account of the violence acts done to women on the island in the past years none other by men alone. Seven rapes have been conducted. She tells about Ann Patchnose who died from internal bleeding they went and shoved a beer bottle up her koozie and then broke it. Big Joey has beaten Philomena and Gazelle also. He prepares Gazelle for kicking Emily when the latter was pregnant thus killing Rosetta when she was almost about to born. He hanged the body of Pussy which appears very much like a slab of meat at a slaughter house. Such is the epitomical fate of an Aboriginal woman. They are facing violence and oppression not only in the hands of white men but also by the men belonging to Native community.

Brownlie argues that Canadian discourses have “long constructed Aboriginal women as particularly likely to be promiscuous and immoral” (161). This stereotype of licentiousness causes Native women to be constructed as “there for the sexual taking” (Anderson 109) and gives way to such type of rapes.

The play *Rose* portrays women in new light wailing and raising their voice for place and power. It highlights Highway’s concept of New or liberated woman who now raises her voice and pose a threat on the racist, sexist, and Colonial policies, and questions the injustice done to her. Emily

has now truly emerged as a woman raising voice for power and justice unlike in *The Rez Sisters*. She sings a song which questions the women's place in society and signifies a sense of awakening in women who are demanding a voice that needs to be heard. She is imprisoned in her glass cage and her liberation is still but a dream and they all need to stand for their liberation.

Chief Big Rose, the eldest Rez sister is depicted as an incarnation of an emerging woman. She is a role model to all other women. She is an emancipated woman who gives prime importance to herself as indicated by her act of commanding headdresses first for herself pushing Bob Rae, the premier of Ontario aside who she says can wait. She does not believe in the traditional roles done by women and stereotypes associated with them. She asserts that she is a twentieth century woman who don't conform to the conventional roles assigned to women.

All women join hand to fight back the oppression they are facing. Emily is preparing the other women taking action against their violence. Emily, Liz, Gazelle sing in collaboration. Their song implies unfettered thinking that has taken hold of the women. The song represents woman as a changed being, not to be used as a toy or object anymore. She has her own worth, own right and place. Emily encourages all of them men like Big Joey should get their share in their brutal acts towards women. He must not be allowed to walk scot free, new women have emerged now, no violence, no oppression, women will be victorious now and even in the times to come. All the women walk into Big Joey's basement to take revenge. Hera, Veronique, Philomena and Annie help Liz to strip Big Joey naked and hang him by the wrists on the two chains where Pussy was found hanging earlier. Rosetta, Rosabella and Chief Big Rose are watching from the side, all intensely aware of what is about to happen. Emily strikes with meat cleaver at Big Joey's crotch and the entire stage turns blood red. It demonstrates women's anger who no longer wants to be the victims of men like Big Joey.

Highway is indeed projecting the mirror of the contemporary society; the women in his society were actually undergoing this Violence, Racism and Discrimination as depicted in his plays. While discussing the success of the play *The Rez Sisters*, Highway said "its greatest accomplishment is that it raised public consciousness of a specific segment of the women's community- Indian women, and older women at that" (qtd. in "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc." 143-144)

Both the plays offer a panorama of miserable plight of the Aboriginals and causes behind it. Highway has not only depicted the Native people and native women in particular as victims of the white world but also represented them as dissenting; raising their voice against the Colonial discriminatory policies mentioned above indicating the pitfalls in Canadian Nationalism which is quite difficult to be established and carried out in reality until such discriminatory policies exist.

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