
The Wasy Women and “This business of living”:

Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters*

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While discussing Highway’s play, dramatist Carol Bolt observes that watching *The Rez Sisters* makes the audience feel part of “an extra-ordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family”. It is extra-ordinary because it involves common women with uncommon dreams. It is exuberant because all these women celebrate life and living at every given moment. And it is life affirming because they are essentially optimistic – refusing to accept death and failure as end and also because the play ends with the hope of a new life on its way.

Tomson Highway, sometimes referred to as an exotic figure in Canadian theatre and the most important one in the latter half of 1980s, is a Cree from Northern Manitoba. He is one of the few writers who work in their second language. Very much a man of music and other performing arts, Highway graduated in Honours with Music and English. After graduation, he worked for a number of native support groups. Highway was especially influenced by James Reaney’s Donnelly trilogy because of its use of its poetic language, imagery and its mythological overtones. His bondage with theatre is apparent when he states, “theatre for me gives the oral tradition a three dimensional context, telling stories by using actors and visual aspects of the stage”. While at Western, during his work with Reaney on *The Canadian Brothers* and *Wacousta*, he was highly influenced by the playwright as he felt that Reaney wrote about working class people, grass root people, basic people from many places. Through his plays, Highway set out to combine his knowledge of Indian reality in Canada with classical structure, artistic language. “It amounted to applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk...”. In less than three years and only two plays, Canadian audience started considering Highway a member of a select group of playwrights whose plays are treated as significant cultural events by Canadian critics, scholars and audiences. Both these plays i.e *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* were winners of the coveted Dora Mavor Moore award.

While analyzing the play in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Daniel David Moses observes

“The majority of Native people, forced to inhabit ignored, economically disadvantages areas called reserves, are not encouraged to regard their own lives as important. The accomplishment of the *Rez Sisters* is that it focuses on a variety of such undervalued lives and brings them up to size” (Moses, 206)

The Rez Sisters : the first in an intended cycle of seven plays, is raucous mix of the comic and the tragic, full of life and dreams. The play spans a summer in 1986, when seven women – all related by birth or marriage – decide to participate in THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD. The plot of the play, though not too thick, is fast moving, at times even frenetic.

The strength of the plot depends on the cyclical character movements rather than the plot line. “The rez sisters are vibrantly alive and endowed with titanic energy” observes Penny Petrone in *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Nothing is private for them; they know everything about each other, including their health problems, family histories, daily routines and even sex habits. They insult and ridicule one another relentlessly but always care no matter what. These reservation sisters are strong characters and when they clash, sparks fly. When they need support, all are there for each other. They are lively with humour as a force to make their lives easier and to get them through dark times.

The rez sisters live on the imaginary reserve of Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin island. Living on a separate geographical location, away from the mainstream community, not only gives Highway’s character a distinct personality, but also offers them a different world view. Moreover, as the dramatist indicates in his notes, ‘Wasaychigan’ means ‘window’ in Ojibway. Thus the reserve functions as a metonym for native communities across the country – looking out on the conspicuous indicators of an economically powerful white society and looking in at its own signs of self-destruction and self-preservation. The Rez Sisters’ self preservation depends on the optimism and their positive outlook. Pain and suffering, though disheartens never destroy them, rather they toughen them.

From her vantage point on the roof of her house, as she hammers on new shingles with her silver hammer, Pelajia Patchnose, the rez sister with the clearest vision and the widest perspective, can see the obvious issues which pull the native community back, and alienate it from the mainstream society. She can read the signs of the fecund family life behind Marie-Adele’s white picket fence, and of negligence and irresponsibility in the garbage heap behind Big Joey’s “dumpy little house”(2). Beyond the reservation, she can just barely see the pulp mill at Espanola where her husband works, and if she were superwoman, she could see the CN Tower in Toronto, where two of her sons work. Thus, for Pelajia, the concept of family extends beyond the reservation and finds a degree of accommodation beyond its parameters. She is also well aware of not only the social, but even the spiritual problems of the reserve. She realizes,

“Everyone here’s crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but drink ... and forget about our Nanabush” (6). She focuses on any positive indicator of survival and empowerment, and both bullies and inspires the other six women, all of whom struggle with ways to survive in a fragmented society. Though they have a very different way of life, isolation has made their life boring and the only source of recreation is the bingo. So, when they hear the news that the biggest bingo game in the world, with a \$ 500,000 dollars’ jackpot, is going to take place in Toronto, they raise money for the trip and set out to Toronto to try their luck. The dreams of Pelajia are difficult to fulfill. A natural leader, she is a stern father figure. She wants paved roads for her reserve. Pelajia’s story is that of learning how to lead, of developing her latent talent into a positive force. This humane character is at her weakest when she uses the hammer to threaten people even if it is for their own good. She uses the hammer constructively as evident by the success in the fundraising scene – and also shares it with others evident when she allows Emily to use it as a gavel in the trip planning scene. When she dispenses with the hammer entirely, while soothing the terrified Marie-Adele in the darkened van, Pelajia emerges as a true leader. The audience witness a touching display of wisdom after Marie-Adele’s funeral where she consoles her sisters in their grief. She tells them, “Life’s like that. ... Kinda silly,

innit, this business of living? But... I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here ... I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you. For me. For all of us. Promise.” (105, 1988) Thus, by the end of the play, Pelajia has accepted her own leadership qualities and determines to use it genuinely to improve the conditions on the reserve rather than just to complain about them. Like the beginning, she is once again back on her roof in the last scene but now her hammer has become a badge of purpose rather than just a physical tool.

Marie-Adele Starblanket is suffering from ovarian cancer. She is the woman “... whose fear, suffering and final ascension into the spirit world drive (the plays) events and characters’ journeys”, observes Denis Johnson in his article ‘Lines and Circles: The “Rez” Plays of Tomson Highway. Marie-Adele is not an ardent follower of Bingo but for the dream which the grand prize might buy i.e. an idyllic island home in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and their fourteen children. This dream is doomed by her growing concerns for her family in the event of her death. There is also a serious strain in her relationship with 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 disappearsPelajia, I’m scared to death”(96) The Trickster figure of Nanabush haunts Marie-Adele throughout the play. In fact, the terminally ill Marie-Adele and the mentally retarded Zhaboonigan are the only two characters aware of Nanabush in his varying guises. He is first apparent to Marie-Adele in her yard as a white seagull, playfully threatening to foul her laundry and upsetting her with his stares. Nanabush then appears to her as a black night hawk, driving her to hysterics with her fears for herself and her family. She dies immediately after the grand bingo. Her death scene comes alive as she waltz with Nanabush (in the guise of bingo master) into the spiritual world. Significantly, Nanabush begins to transfer into the night hawk, in effect an Ojibway angel of death. The tragic, ironic death of Marie-Adele is also constructed as a magical transformation. Through the agency of the shape-shifter Nanabush, she is brought to an acceptance of her death, its cruelty and horror soften up into a welcoming which provide a final relief to her from her pain. Nanabush thus teaches the meaning of existence on earth by embodying its many contradictions. Death is cruel and final, but it is also a transformation – a phase in the continuing cycle of life. In this way, after having resisted for so long, in this scene Marie-Adele appears to accept her death in the same way as she accepted her life, gently and affectionately.

The death of Marie-Adele creates regenerative ripples through almost all the characters. Veronique for example has always appeared as a narrow minded gossipmonger, frustrated by her own childlessness. After Marie-Adele’s death, Veronique fulfills her own dream by moving into the Starblanket home to take care of the former’s family. Eugene who is a hardworking widower now, can provide all the thing that her alcoholic husband never could : a huge roast to cook, a good stove to cook it in and also a ready made family in want of her love and care. Thus a cycle is completed. We understand that Veronique small mindedness was a symptom not of having two little love to give, but rather of having two few people on whom she can bestow it.

Pelajia’s sister, Philomena’s story signifies the victory of simple needs and simple dreams. While discussing this character Johnston states that during the course of the play, Philomena moves from contentment to concern of the present, to despondency rooted in the past

sorrows, to return with greater contentment to concerns of the present. Philomena's dream is to win 'every (bingo) jackpot between here and Espanola', so that she might build for herself a new ultra modern indoor bathroom with a large white toilet on which she can enthrone herself. During the long drive in the van, she reveals that the date of the grand bingo holds a very special significance to her. It was the birthday of her lost child, who was born as a result of her affairs with a married whiteman and whom she had to give up for adoption without even learning whether it was a boy or a girl. This is the only scene where the ever cheerful Philomena appears low. But she is not to stay depressed for a long period and emerges once again in her usual happy mood as she is the only one to win any money at the bingo and to realize her dream. In the process, her other dream of finding her lost child is forgotten.

On her first appearance, Emily Dictionary seems an unappealing character : a coarse, tough foul mouthed young woman who has recently come to the reservation from California. Emily is an ex-biker with a rough and tough outlook. However, during their journey, she reveals her dark past and we learn that her present hard bitten persona maybe just one stage in a long process of healing. Her former husband beat her viciously for ten years before she left him. She then joined a gang of native lesbians 'bike chicks' in San Francisco and had a relationship with one of them. Her lover unfortunately had been driven to self destruction and suicide by going headlong into a large eight wheeler truck. Thus, with the spray of her lover's blood on her neck, Emily drives on 'straight on to daylight', back to her home on the reserve, bent on avoiding any self destruction at all costs. Thus latent loving nature of Emily is brought out by Marie-Adele's fear and by Zhaboonigan's retardation. Rejuvenation takes place when her current affair with Big Joey results in pregnancy. A new life, a hope completes the cycle, compensating for the loss of Marie-Adele's life, as Emily turns into a loving sister for Zhaboonigan and a loving mother to her baby.

Annie Cook, the eternal optimist, has a single track mind, "when I go to the biggest bingo in the world, I will win. For sure I will win ... then I will take all my money and ... buy every single one of Patsy Cline's records". She is the one who had brought the news of the bingo and whose dream is partly realized, as she joins her intended music group at the end of the play.

And then, there is Zhaboonigan Patterson, Veronique mentally disabled adopted daughter. She had been raped by a gang of white boys. Highway shows her reliving the rape in the play at a point when the other women are in a state of anarchic conflict before they finally resolve to work together to raise the necessary money for the trip to Toronto. Thus comic Mayhem on the stage is cut through with a graphic account of the rape which is an undeniable indicator of the violence inflicted upon one native woman. Presentation of this character is based on an event which took place in a small town in Manitoba. Helen Betty Osborne a young native girl was gang raped, assaulted with a screwdriver and was left to die on the road. Although many people new about the incident, only one youth of the four was brought to trial and received a very light sentence. Zhaboonigan accompanies the sisters on their trip even though the audience would be relieved if she just faded out of the play. Zhaboonigan is the most disturbing and depressing character to watch. She is spastic and has difficulty in speaking. The audience is forced to come to terms with her and start acknowledging her as more than the resident idiot. She is one of those memorable characters who typify both mystery and inalienable truth. She is also a reflection on the compassionate nature of the

native women. This is to say that in a time where too many mentally handicapped people are hidden away in institutions, the women of the reserve welcome her, care for her and offer her the same love that they share for each other.

In an interview with the native critic Hartmut Lutz, Highway states that the natives have a mythology that is thousands and thousands of years old, which was almost destroyed, sometimes obliterated or affected by Christian religion. But when this happens, he feels, “inevitably, the spirit of it survives even more strongly. ... It’s coming back, it’s still very much alive in our spirits. There is a spirituality that still is so powerful and beautiful and passionate”. It is this unshakable spirituality that keeps the native community in Canada ticking and vibrant and in the “business of living”.

So, there is the character of Nanabush, the Ojibway Trickster figure- disguised as a seagull, a nighthawk and finally as the Bingo Master. The character of Nanabush is vital in presenting the values of Native culture. This Trickster, known by different names in different languages, is a central figure in any Native mythology. In his note on Nanabush in the play, Highway states, “Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, (Nanabush) teaches us about the nature and meaning of existence on the planet earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit. Some say that Nanabush left this continent when the whiteman came. We believe he is still here among us. ... without him - and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever.” (xii,1988). For the native audience, who is raised on the stories of the trickster, Nanabush is easily accepted as a seagull, a seducer, a fast talking bingo master. But to a mainstream theatergoer, this character is at worst an irritating ambiguity and at best a mystery which they willingly admit they don’t understand. According to Highway, the trickster is as important to Cree culture as Christ is to western culture. Embodying qualities of native language and values, Nanabush is funny, visceral and maybe of either gender. While explaining the divergence of Nanabush and Christian tradition, Highway takes help of a circle and explains that a native looks at life as a continuous cycle.. According to Helen Gilbert’s *Postcolonial Plays*,

One of Nanabush’s function is to absorb and transform the pain resulting from atrocities associated with the colonization of Native land and cultures” (391). Whenever Zhaboonigan remembers her brutal rape incident, she sees Nanabush who helps to console her pain. Nanabush also helps removing her hatred of white guys, and leads her soul into something beautiful in the earth like the birds of the sky. By doing so, Nanabush tries to erase the brutal concept of race of the society from peoples’ mind. (391)

A self rejuvenating force. By comparison Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering and death, connoting stagnation and failure. Whereas in native tradition, death does not mean end, for the spirit or the soul survives in the figure of the trickster and continues to lead the newcomer.

It is this spirit that keeps their hope alive and shapes their inherent optimistic nature. It is noteworthy that whenever any of this women mentions winning the bingo, she says , “when I win” and not “if I win”. Thus, each character comes to term with her sorrows. In spite of

expressing a wish to leave the reserve at the first possible opportunity, they are unshakably and resolutely bound to Wasaychigan and do not wish to leave it. And the play concludes with Emily voicing a feeling essentially common to all for their reserve by singing,

when I die, I may not go to heaven,
I don't know if they let Indians in :
If they don't, just let me go to Wasy, Lord,
Cuz Wasy is as close as I have been.

To conclude, one can say that; no matter what, Tomson Highway's these striking cast of characters revealing both blemishes and beauty also possess a general human dignity. Rez Sisters, and their native community will remain "in this silly business of living" and they will actually live and not just exist.

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