

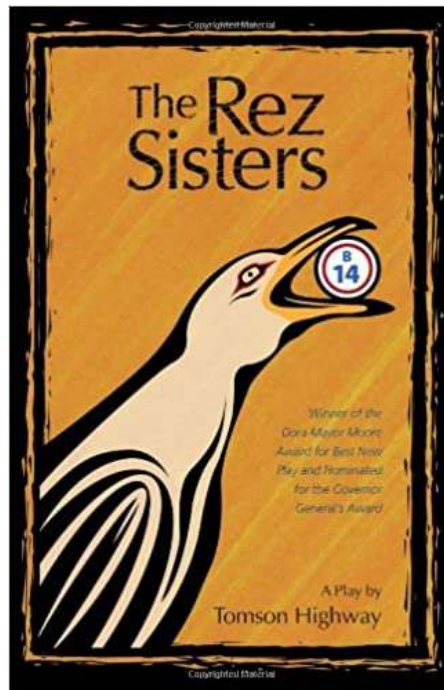
A Study on Reservation Life with Reference to Tomson Highway's *Rez Sisters*

V Grace Aganice

Assistant Professor

Yuvakshetra College, Palakkad

graceaganicev@gmail.com



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Abstract

The Rez Sisters by Tomson Highway which received much acclaim in Canadian theatres depicts the realistic life of reservation camps. The paper unfolds the drastic life of seven women who are called as sisters either by birth or marriage. Their wish for a better life is visible throughout the play. The paper focuses on the seven women's optimistic nature towards life despite their failures in life. Also, it heightens the Indian spirituality and the pride of Indian culture and myth. The hard working class-women on reservation teach the audience the rich

culture of Native Indians. The trickster is found from the very beginning of the play which shows the spiritual presence among them which is nowadays absent in the world.

Keywords: Tomson Highway, *Rez Sisters*, Dream, Optimism, Biggest Bingo At Toronto, Native Identity.



Tomson Highway
Courtesy: en.wikipedia.org

The *Rez Sisters*, namely, the seven who live in Reservation are in one way or the other deprived of a decent life. The play portrays the lives of seven of them who are called sisters either by the bondage of marriage or blood relations. Tomson Highway, a Cree Native of Manitoba, sketches the life of Canada's Native people. He received a wide applause for this work, namely, Dora Mavor Award in 1986-87 for the best new play in Toronto theatre and was also nominated for the Governor General's Award.

The seven sisters in the play are really optimistic in their life. The play is knit in a manner that it shatters the expectations of the audience, because it is in a way completely contradicting other 'Reservation stories', which are mostly related to traumas and misery. It brings out a surprise element as all the characters in the 'Reserve' are always happy in themselves. The Natives' humor and optimism are replicated in the play which is atypical during the period. The two-act play is set in the fictional Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. The seven ladies Pelajia Patchnose, Philomena Moosetail, Annie Cook, Marie Adele, Emily Dictionary, Veronique St. Pierre and Zhaboonigan Peterson decide to pool their resources and travel to Toronto to try the Biggest Bingo Game in the World.

Highway was applauded for his positive and optimistic representation of his characters which presents the inner lives of the *Rez sisters*. Their optimism is visible when every sister in

the play speaks about their dream of winning the ‘Biggest Bingo’. They believe and hope that the jackpot amount can put an end to their hardships on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve. ‘When I win’ is how they begin their wishful sentences. No one says, ‘If I win’.

The New York Times in an article remarks about Highway’s characterizations,

Mr. Highway, a Cree, may be writing about a mythical community, but “the Rez Sisters” is rooted in harsh realities. Joblessness, prejudice, and alcoholism are endemic. The old sustaining Indian rituals have died, replaced by the platitudes of consumerism and country – western music. While his women don’t lack for get-up -and -go, they really . . . (David 15-21)

The people in the ‘Reserve’, despite their simplest and meager life are really optimistic about their life. Palajia, who opens the play by stating her desire to leave, “PELAJIA: I wanna go to Toronto ... I’ m tired, Philomena, tired of this place. These days I wanna leave so bad” (Highway 2-3). A natural Indian life is visible when Veronique is found complaining of her husband, Emily been beaten up for ten years by her husband and Annie who lost her lover to her own sister. Marie Adele is now stricken with cancer and Philomena, who seems the most jovial among them mourns over her child, whom she was forced to leave twenty eight years ago. The sisters, in a way or other have their own sorrows and worries but they have a hope in their life.

Highway tries to explore womanhood and their community through the Rez sisters. No woman in the play are particularly favored by fortune but what is common in their life is the desire to live a better life as stated by Thomas King in his anthology “ the intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a native sense of family”(65).

The Rez sisters are drawn into this desire, perhaps the ‘American dream’ or simply the ‘Western dream’ by Toronto. The materialistic wealth and the metropolitan life at Toronto, attracts them for a better life. The white men live a polished life which is seized for the people in Reserve. The reserve has no paved roads and this was the only dream of Pelajia who wish to have a paved road for ‘Wasy’. “PELAJIA: The dust today. It’s these dirt roads. Dirt roads all over. Even the main street. If I were chief around here, that’s the very first thing I would do is...” (Highway 113). The reserve is kept away from all the welfare and goodness. “ Years now that old chief’s been making speeches about getting paved roads, ‘for my people’ and still we got dirt roads all over” (Highway 7). They hope for a better life through winning the jackpot The Biggest Bingo at Toronto.

Dream has a major significance in the play. Each woman in the play offers the audience a different attitude toward life on the reservation- as well as their dream of escaping their fate at Reservation. Seven of them exhibit their natural desire to rise above their current situation and

construct a better world for their children and each other. A psychological perspective gives a clear picture of these women. They are self-determined in achieving their dreams. Self – determined nature of the Rez sisters allows them to feel that they have control over their choices and lives. They feel motivated to take action when they feel that what they do will have an effect on the outcome. The Rez sisters despite their failure in the Bingo are really optimistic in life.

Psychologists like Scheies and Carver who theorized the ‘disposition’ towards optimism in their studies called it as ‘Dispositional optimism’. Optimistic individuals are positive about events in daily life. **Give the citation/s for Scheies and Carver here.**

Highway is successful in painting a Native Indian community female characters: Annie is the busy body; Emily acts as a masculine figure; Philomena as a comic relief; Marie Adele as a perfect mother; Veronique as the bitter gossip and Zaboornigan, Veronique’s mentally challenged adopted daughter. And the Trickster Nanabush is present from the very first scene of the play, which also shows the spiritual strength of the Native Indian Reserve. The failure in the Bingo and the death of Marie Adele has forced them to reevaluate their lives and take the responsibility of change upon themselves. “VERONIQUE: Annie cook. Haven’t you heard I’m cooking for Eugene and the children these days? It’s been four days since the funeral as you know may she rest in peace... but I was the only person on this reserve who was willing to help with these 14 little orphans” (Highway111). The gossipier though she is, Veronique is found happy in cooking in her new stove for the fourteen children of Marie Adele. This reflects the true sense of Native Indian reservation.

Tomson Highway is very much successful in strengthening the pride and Native identity of Native Indians residing in Canada. His motive was to explore the traditional contemporary native themes. Tomson gives voice to people who had never had it before on the Canadian stage focusing on a group of working class female characters struggling against poverty.

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V Grace Aganice

Assistant Professor

Yuvakshetra College, Palakkad

graceaganicev@gmail.com