

Social Degradation of Native People Portrayed in *The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe* by George Ryga

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Abstract

This paper analyses the struggling life of native people whose culture, identity, and social value going through the process of degradation as a result of colonialism. Through the life of Rita Joe, it explores how Rita was elevated to the status of saint, ecstasy freedom she attained, ecstasy of honor, ecstasy of self-affirmation, dignity, ecstasy of sainthood, how she attained integrity which is denied in this physical world.

Keywords: George Ryga, *The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe*, Canadian aboriginal, social degradation, Class struggle, Colonialism, Assimilation.

The literature that has been produced from the Canadian experiences that is written by Canadians is Canadian literature. While writing about the social condition of indigenous people, the subject matter of the writers is common and general in topic -- inclusive of class struggle; ill-treating of blacks on the basis of education, employment, even unequal justice; alienation; personal unfulfillment; and so on. The reason is all the written text resulted from the same bitter experiences of one's own which were the common issues faced by the aboriginals in their land.

Being a prominent Canadian playwright and novelist, George Ryga draws the picture of a young native woman who shifted along with her beloved Jaimie Paul from rural to urban; from reservation to city seeking for a good job and to settle their life. That explores the life of aboriginal natives who are marginalized by the whites, and also how the modern youth are attracted by luxurious life of city and they leave their family and reservation in order to follow these luxuries.

The play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was written in 1967 and first played in Playhouse theatre, now called Vancouver. The story of Rita Joe corresponds to a real incident which happened in 1967. Ryga has written this story based on a newspaper article which reported the murder of an aboriginal girl or woman who was raped and put in a slum.

The two-acts play begins in a trial room where Rita was called guilty and was accused of prostitution, theft, vagrancy, and alcoholism. Knowing the fact that Rita being a native and

no one would be there to help her in that strange land, she was allotted eight hours to produce witness from her side to justify, but she failed. But the police produced strong witnesses and fake evidences against Rita. All those witnesses are white, privileged, and dominant. They included her teacher, the school board clerk, the policemen, priest, Mr. Homer and even the Magistrate all representing the whites.

Instead of delivering justice, the Magistrate criticized and advised her to go back to the Reserve. The breakdown of justice can be quoted from the words of the Magistrate:

The quality of law under which you live, and function determines the rent quality of freedom that was yours today.... Your home and well-being are protected. Roads of the city are open to us. So are the galleries, libraries, the administrative and the public buildings... Nobody is a prisoner here.... (Magistrate, Act I)

The wordings of the magistrate hardly showed any concern for her feeling and denounced that indigenous culture is inferior pointing out to her uncombed hair, imperfect dressing. The injustice of law is visible by which the laws in the city never protects the natives in reserves. In addition, inefficiency of the legal system to protect the people of the country is also revealed.

Rita replied ironically, “the first time I tried to go home I was picked by some men who gave me five dollars. And then they arrested me,” revealing the worse situation how she was arrested for prostitution. She added, “you got rules here that were made before I was born... I was hungry when I stole something... and I was so lonely when I started whoring.” The extreme sufferings of aboriginals are seen in these phrases; poverty, unemployment, exploitation by dominants, violence against them and so on. Rita was sentenced imprisonment for 30 days.

Jaimie who wanted to become a singer. But unfortunately, his nativity gave no opportunities at all. So, he thus worked as a carpenter which was also taken away. Being a native, Jaimie also failed to get another job. Thus, out of frustration he was addicted to alcoholism and imprisoned for making problems in public.

When the Magistrate asked whether she was employed anywhere in “obedience to the law”, she thought of her bitter experience of working in a white man’s tire company and intimated that “once I had a job in a tire store...” Thus, she was charged for vagrancy.

Often Rita goes back to her beautiful memories with Jaimie and her sister Eileen Joe. The seal of nativity rejected job opportunities for Eileen too.

Since the class struggle of whites and blacks exists, Rita’s teacher Miss Donohue stated her ex-student Rita is a prostitute, poor student, incapable of focus and of finding success in the classroom. Instead of being a guide, she is ineffective to help the native children out. The name of the teacher is used as a symbol, that is, ‘Don-O-hue’ means ‘put on a color’. In a sense the color is white.

The clerk also told a lie before the court that he had sent a letter to Rita asking her to continue her studies, just to show that whites are concerned of education of black and native children. Mr. Homer presented himself as a responsible person for social charity apparently, but only to make the blacks feel that they are indebted to him. Homer announces that he has arranged helicopter to bring Rita's sick mother to city hospital to give necessary treatment. But they could not save the life of her mother.

The priest of the church Father Andrews visited Rita and gave her cigarettes to smoke in the jail and asked her to confess her sins and return to the reserve. Rita ironically pointed out the truth said by her Uncle Dan Joe, "long ago the white man came with Bibles to talk to my people... and the white men had our land." Priest gets angry and comes out saying not to blame the church and goes away. This scene can be interpreted as saying that religion has been used as a tool for colonizing the land by whites. Priest here symbolizes as a mask for colonialism. Jaimie describes Rita's father David Joe was "a kind of black whom the white people liked". It seems that David Joe pretended that he was obedient and pleasing to them which made the white to like him.

Act II opens Rita's imprisonment and she got released after 30 days. Jaimie never failed to keep his self-identity, especially before the person like Homer. Jaimie was again imprisoned for having verbal argument with Homer. Rita was with Jaimie after the release of both, but he was attacked and thrown away by three murderers and they raped the dead body of Rita. Their story and tragic life show that reserves have no voice and no place in the city. The drama ends with the funeral of Jaimie and Rita. Eileen recalls that "when Rita first came to city, the cement made her feet hurt her." Even after knowing the implication that the reserved or natives can't inhabit the city where white dominated, Rita never returned to her family which turned out to the loss of her life.

The threads of marginalization, colonization, assimilation, infantilization, and dehumanization become the subject matter of Ryga. Through his writing he shows that although he is from the dominant white culture, he observed them differently and wrote from the viewpoint of the aboriginals. He also questioned the legal system and identity crisis where some struggle to find self, others to protect their identity as well. The play brings out the assaults on blacks and partiality in law. The play also questions the role of priest, church, and God.

References

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