Chapter V

Gender and Resistance in *The Rez Sisters*
Tomson Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* (1988) brings out the violent juxtaposition of the cultural values of the Native and Non-Native Canadians. Although there is cultural accommodation in some respect with a White capitalist society, the negative consequences of this interaction have been brought out in the play by portraying the impact of this collision on the lives of native women and men (who are absent) of Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. As Highway has indicated in his notes to the play; Wasaychigan means ‘window’ in Ojibway and 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 socio-cultural and economic impact has been encapsulated in terms of decadent spiritual health resulting from the traumatic colonial encounter. The cultural impact has been highlighted in the opening pages of the play, where Pelajia Patchmose from her vantage point “away uphere” on the roof of her house, as she hammers on new shingles with her silver hammers, can see “half of Manitoulin island on a clear day”. She could see signs of fecund family life behind Marie-Adele’s white picket fence, and signs of negligence in the garbage heap behind Big Joey’s “dumpy little house” (Highway 1988:2). Beyond the reserve, she can just barely make out the pulp mill at Espanola where her husband works and if she had binoculars she could see the superstack in Sudbury and if she were a super woman she could see the CN Tower in Toronto. The colonial impact has been described by Ngugiwa Thiongo in his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Languages in African Literature* (1986) as:
The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland — it makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death — wish.

(Thiongo 1986: 3)

The play describes the attempt of seven Rez Sisters to win the jackpot at the “Biggest Bingo in the World” in Toronto to realize their dreams. Their dreams are located within the materialistic White popular culture and hence Pelajia wants paved roads in the Reserve, her sister Philomena wants an indoor bathroom with a large white toilet where she can enthrone herself; Annie who is infatuated with a Jewish country singer wants the biggest record player on which she can play country music; Veronique wants the biggest stove on which she can cook meals for everybody. However it is the sub-text, which brings out the interaction among gender, race and colonialism. Pelajia’s dreams unlike her sisters are difficult to fulfill:

She is the natural leader of the group, a stern father figure in coveralls brandishing her ever present hammer. A sense of her own powerlessness and aimlessness in the community has brought on her current malaise, to the point
where she wants to abandon this society and move to Toronto. For Pelajia, the huge prizes in ‘The Biggest Bingo In the World’ re-animated her dream of paving the roads on the reserve, which would empower her leadership by demonstrating the wisdom of her proposals.

(Johnston 1990: 257)

Philomeno’s history which she re-counts in the long drive in the van reveals that the date of “The Biggest Bingo in the World” holds special significance, since it was the birthday of her lost child. Almost thirty years earlier, while working as a secretary in Toronto’s garment district, she had an affair with a married white man. After he broke it off, Philomeno gave up her new born baby for adoption without even learning if it was a boy or a girl. Similarly, Emily Dictionary who seems to be an unappealing character, had recently come home to the reserve from California. On the trip to Toronto, however her story unfolds and we learn that her former husband beat her ruthlessly for ten years, and after that she had joined a gang of Native lesbian biker chicks in San Francisco, of whom Rose had been driven to self-destruction by her experience of “how fucking hard it is to be an Indian in this country” (Tomson 97). Refusing to give in she drives her bike down the middle of the highway, and goes head-on into a big 18- wheeler. Emily, however with the spray of her lover’s blood on her neck, drives on “straight into daylight” (Tomson 97) back to her home on the Reserve. However it is Zhaboongan, Veronique’s mentally challenged adopted daughter, who had been gang raped by a gang of white boys, that the minority discourse is heard:
---, we must realize that minority discourse is, in the first instance, the product of damage – damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture. The destruction involved is manifold, bearing down on variant modes of social formation, dismantling previously functional economic systems, and deracinating whole populations at best or decimating them at worst. In time, with this material destruction, the cultural formations, languages and diverse modes of identity of the ‘minoritized peoples’ are irreversibly affected, if not eradicated, by the effects of their material deracination from the historically developed social and economic structures in terms of which alone they ‘made sense’.

(Jan Mohamed and Lloyd 1997:238)

The text by inscribing the experiences of Native Women has brought out the interconnections among race, class and gender. The observation made by Julia Emberley in her essay, ‘Aboriginal Women’s Writing and the Cultural Politics of Representation’ about reading the cultural politics of Aboriginal women’s writing can be applied to this play:

Texts by Aboriginal women demand to be read in the context of resistance, in particular, resistance to the structure of internal colonialism in Canada.

(Emberley 1996 : 99)

The text has raised the issue of female agency and female subjectivity and their “relationship to the symbolic formation of internal colonialism” (Emberley 101). The chapter will analyse the construction of the gendered subject of resistance in the
context of colonialism in Canada. There is no fixed, monolithic subject position offered by the text, rather there are different positions of the resisting subject. Resistance for the Rez sisters is a process and the process of claiming the position of resisting subject can be interpreted “as a practical staging of deconstructive turn” (Emberley 102):

In a deconstructive analysis, the intolerable hierarchies of race, class, sexuality and gender contained in binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, inferior/superior, Indian/white, woman/man are over turned, when these closed oppositions, in which subjects are contained by a revolving motion of being either one or the other, are displaced. The point to displacing this opposition, taking an indifferent position, toward either side of the opposition, is to re-articulate open, or alternate, subject position.

(Emberley 102)

The construction of the Rez Sisters is not confined to the binary opposition of victim and victimizer in the text, rather there is a search for an alternate space, which till the end of the play is not found. The Rez Sisters occupy a range of subject positions, since on one hand all the Sisters point to the impact of the white capitalist culture and therefore the need for change. However the nostalgia for the great bingo player of the past is common to all the Rex Sisters. It is in this context that ‘The Biggest Bingo in the World’ emerges as a complex sign symbolizing decay and defeat but is also seen as a strategy for survival for all the Rez Sisters. Philomena Moosetail and her sister are completely located within the White capitalist culture and hence she desires to visit every bingo and hit the jackpot. Annie Cook in the play brings out
another dimension of native interpellation with the dominant White culture in terms of her daughter’s marriage with Frenchman, who owned a garage. It is Emily Dictionary, who had recently arrived and Zhabonigan Peterson who reflect the complex configuration of interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender and emerge as mutilated bodies on which colonial politics have been played out. Marie-Adela, who is the mainspring of the play provides a critique of the prevailing ideology and offers a different voice:

Marie --Adela does not love bingo for its own sake as Annie and Philomena do, but for the dream which the grand prize might buy: an idyllic island home in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and their fourteen children.

(Johnston :258)

Nanabush in the play represents the part of dream world of North American Indian mythology. Essentially a “comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet earth, he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great spirit” ( Tomson xii). However with the advent of the White settler, Nanabush has left this continent and that in turn has had adverse effect on the spiritual health of Indian culture. Nanabush represents one aspect of the struggle between hegemonic cultures and minorities, which is the “recovery and mediation of cultural practices that continue to be subjects to ‘institutional forgetting,’ which as a form of control of one’s memory and history” (Jan Mohammed and Lloyd 239) is one of the gravest damage done to minority culture.
The merging of the figures of the Bingo Master and Nanabush breaks binary structures and as mentioned earlier the Bingo offers a chance for Rez Sisters to come together and the text offers a position for the formation of active feminine subjectivity moving towards transformation of their oppressed feminine position:

Coerced into a negative generic subject-position, the oppressed individuals respond by transforming that position into a positive, collective one--- The minority’s attempt to negate the prior hegemonic negation of itself is one of its most fundamental forms of affirmation.

(John Mohammed and Lloyd 242)

As Tomson Highway described in his interview:

I think that every society is constantly in a stage of change, of transformation, of metamorphoses. I think it is very important that it continues to be so to prevent the stagnation of our imaginations, our spirits, our souls --- what I really find fascinating about the future of my life, the life of my people, the life of my fellow Canadians is the searching for this voice, this new identity, this tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds --- combining them and coming up with something new.

The text illustrate this “coming up with something new” in the episode when the Rez Sisters try to move away from their passive feminine position by marching to
the Band office demanding funds for their trip to Toronto to attend the Bingo and unfolds a vision of transformation and empowerment:

Palajia: I say we all march down to the Band office and ask the Band Council for a loan that will pay for the trip to this bingo --- I'll tell him we’ll build paved roads all over the reserve with our prize money. I’ll tell him the people will stop drinking themselves to death because they’ll have paved roads drive to work on. I’ll tell him the people will stop fighting and screwing around and Nanabush will come back to us because he’ll have paved roads to dance on. There’s enough money in there for everyone, I’ll say ---.

(Tomson 59)

The text reflects the dynamics of minority subject position in terms of strength and weakness, the affirmations and negations. While there is a desire to move out from their present location, the movement is towards the wish to be located within White patriarchal society.

During the state of anarchic conflict, when the sisters debate among themselves about the means of raising money for the trip to Toronto, Zhaoonigam will relive her rape. Highway cuts through the comic mayhem with this graphic account of rape which is an indicator of the violence inflicted upon native women.

The second act opens with the women taking affirmative action about going to Toronto. Collectively they possess a wide range of skills, which they employ to raise the necessary amount of $ 1400 for the trip: cleaning, harvesting, baking, recycling, entertaining, home maintenance and entrepreneurial skills are all put to use in
mechanical manner for fund raising purpose. The journey to Toronto are scenes of quiet introspection among the sisters as they drive their borrowed van through the night to Toronto. These scenes as mentioned earlier constitute the sub-text, which bring out the subject position, and the process of objectification central to the philosophy of patriarchal racism emerges:

Through objectification – the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghost like, given the status of other – an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied self-hood which is after all point of objectification. A group of human beings – a people – are denied their history, their language, their music. Their cultural values are ignored. This history, this language, this music, this values exist in the sub-culture, but in the dominant culture only certain elements are chosen, recast, co-opted, and made available to the definition of these people. And these elements presented by the dominant culture tend to serve the purpose of objectification and, therefore oppression.

(Cliff 1995: 141)

The voices of these women provide insights which have been rendered invisible in the main text. The observations made by Babara Smith in her essay, ‘Toward a black feminist criticism’ in the context of the black feminist criticism can be applied to the play. She observes that:
black women’s experience and culture, and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the ‘real world’ of white male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible and unknown.

(Smith 1985: 3)

The death of Marie Adela transforms the play and resistance is now located in the text in a manner which brings out the concept of “Cultural Contamination” (Brydon 1995: 136) and the play explores the creative potential of cultural contamination. The play is not guided by the view of cultural authenticity that results in continued marginality and eventual death of the Native voice:

Whose interests are served by this retreat into preserving an untainted authenticity? Not the native groups seeking land rights and political powers. Ironically such tactics encourage native peoples to isolate themselves from contemporary life and full citizenhood.

(Brydon 141)

The change evident in the play is a movement towards a new globalization which simultaneously “asserts local independence and global inter-dependencies. It seeks a way to co-operate without homogenizing----” (Brydon 141). The transformation is evident in the Rez Sisters. Pelajria, who earlier used her hammer to threaten people, now develops her latent talent in a positive manner to lead her people. Speaking at Marie – Adela’s funeral she envisages some kind of agency for herself:

By the end of the play Pelajia has accepted her own talent for leadership and determines to use it genuinely, improve conditions on the reserve rather than
just to complain about them. She is back on her roof where she began the play, but her hammer has become a badge of purpose rather than just a physical tool.

(Johnston 258)

The change is evident in other Sisters and Emily Dictionary is pregnant and she is willing to be the big sister to Zhaboonigan. Veronique will be provided with all those things like the stove by the widower Engene, which her alcoholic husband could not. Transformation as a result of ‘Cultural Contamination’ results in the absence of negative response in the first major play of Tomson Highway. As Tomson Highway has observed, “I am sure some people went to Rez expecting crying and meaning and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they’ve heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humour and law and optimism plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology” (Johnston 259). The construction of femininity undergoes a change from passive to active and resistance is central to the construction of femininity.

Resistance can be located in the play in the construction of the native, since the ‘Native’ in Canadian literature was a conventional figure but not a voice and was an ideological construct and a margin recreated to confirm to the Loyalist version of Canadian history:

If Native characters spoke, they spoke in archaisms or without articles in the sham eloquence of florid romance of the muted syllables of deprivation. If Native character moved, they moved according to European schedules of arrangement, as faithful friends or savage foes, or as marginal figures the
mighty would afford to ignore. Over the course of time, even historical individuals turned from persons into signs — out of such prototypes was a Loyalist version of Canadian history. But the preponderant influence of this version of history dependent on the construction of margins: The tendency it established was to deny Native communities respect for their own history, to make their own position in history contingent upon European perspectives, to displace one language of perception with a self-justifying substitute.

(New 1990: 4-5)

Terry Goldie’s essay, ‘Signs of the Themes: The Value of a Politically Grounded Semiotics’ comments on the images of the Indian in white Canadian literature in terms of fear and temptation:

From the beginning to the present, the image of the Indian and Inuk in Canadian culture exists within a limited semiotic field, in which the image, the signifier, has at best a tenuous relationship with the implied signified, the indigene of “real-life”. The borders of this field are best seen in light of the “standard commodities” which Edward Said notes in Orientalism. These are the aspects of the image given most value in the economics of literary discourse.

(Goldie 1987:85)

In the play we hear the female voice initiating a process, where the margin interacts with the centre and at the level of textual production “a contestatory discourse that positions itself as a literature of resistance” (Godard 1990: 184) is heard.
The text is therefore a site of struggle, with the Rez Sisters engaging in a dialogue with alternative discourses, which hegemonic discourse tries to render invisible. The ‘Native Woman’ is no longer an empty sign, located within the binary pair of victim and victimizer, possessing all that which the white woman lacks. In the text the Rez Sisters by participating in the bingo re-write their subject positions and there is displacement of dominant structures of power and they occupy the within / without position with respect to power as mentioned in terms of their ideological positions they occupy in the narrative. The emerging subject position challenge fixed subject position and ‘essentialism’ by challenging the representation of Native Woman in dominant culture. One of the features of ‘Minor Literature’ in terms of celebrating of “centrifugal potential” (Vevaina and Godard 1996 :15) in terms of the action and speech of the Rez Sisters results in a kind of multi-accentuality, which dominant white discourse had rendered invisible.

The counter – discourse produced creates the resisting subject created within the discursive field, which is a complex one, creating potential for agency for the Rez Sisters to be exercised within a situation of constraint:

It is in such a double-bind, in such a self- contradictory and ambivalent instance of enunciation that the subordinate subject is positioned. But it is by exploring the fissures and cracks which paradox opens in the claims of the dominant discourse, that an alternate logic may be constructed, a logic grounded not on the binary codes of the law of the excluded middle, but in the logics of relativity or catastrophe theory with their serial or multiple interactions. their
theorizing chaos. This will open up a view of discourse as a field of contesting knowledges rather than as monolithic totalitarian imposition of the Law.

(Godard 195)

The text does away with the binary structure of dominators against dominated and the response of the sisters is complex and contradictory accepted in some ways and resisted in others. Foucault’s concept of power functioning within “System of Systems’ that produced “polymorphous power effects operative in micro political climates”(Godard 195) help us conceptualize the network of power. The Rez Sisters struggle is at various levels and the ambiguity results in the text becoming a dialogic text challenging hierarchy creating in-between space. Francesco Loriggio in his essay, ‘The Question of the Corpus: Ethnicity and Canadian Literature’ has described the “in-betweenness of ethnicity, its simultaneous tangencies with language and culture, would see, rather, to call for paradigms that assert both stability and instability, the centrifugal and centripetal” (Loriggio 1987: 60).

The feature of in-between space in the play results in play of double voiced discourse within which the Rez Sisters operate and the text becomes a site of intersecting discourses where inside and outside are relative positions and one is not subjected to a singular power position at one level. Nanabush and the Bingo Master at one level representing the colonized and the colonizer collapse and the Bingo Master changes with sudden bird like movement into the nighthawk creating in-between space towards the end of the play.
Act one brings out the image of race coupled with gender and hence the Rez Sisters are alienated from their traditional roots, neither can they relate to the White capitalist society. However as the play proceeds the process of negotiation begins and there is no search for a ‘pure space’ and hence cultural contamination. The relation of Bingo to the Sisters at the collective and at the individual level bring out their “cultural siege” (Godard 199) in terms of functioning of ideology. White capitalist ideology is not a set of deliberate distortions imposed on “from above, but a complex and contradictory systems of representation (discourse, image, myths) through which we experience ourselves in relation to each other and to the social structures in which we experience ourselves” (Newton and Rosenfelt 1985 : XIX)

Bingo as a sign brings out the complexities of the situation presented in the text, since the play is not merely a tale of individual and inevitable sufferings, but a “story of struggle and relations of powers” (Newton and Rosenfelt XV). The Bingo in this context illustrates the Foucauldian model of operations neither of power, where nobody is completely a victim nor outside power. It is this ambiguous subject position, which govern their response to the dominant ideology:

The response of oppressed groups to hegemonic culture is complex and frequently contradictory: accepted forcibly perhaps in some ways, it is resisted in others.

(Godard 195)

The decision of the Rez Sisters to travel to Toronto brings out the dialectics of the play:
It is a way of seeing that prompts us to locate in the same situation forces of oppression and seeds of resistance, to construct woman in a given moment in history simultaneously as victims and as agents.

(Newton and Rosefelt xxii)

The description of their activities as they prepare for their journey partly reflects this complexity. As the women start their fund raising activity, the drive is “underlined by a wild rhythmic beat from the musician, one that gets wilder and wilder with each successive beat though always underpinned by this persistent, almost dance like pulse. The movement of the women covers the entire stage area, and like the music, gets wilder and wilder, until by the end it is as if we are looking at an insane eight-ring circus” (Tomson 70).

The transformation mentioned by the playwright is not a radical departure but signals “reciprocal influences between subordinate and ruling classes” (Godard 194) Pelajia Patchnose’s voice is a reflection of this vision:

Pelajia: Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we’ve ever been to in our lives, huh? You know, life’s like that, I figure --- Kinda silly, innit, this business of living? But what choice do we have? When some fool of a being goes and puts us Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, dishes out this lot we got right now. But, I figure we gotta make the most of it while we’re here ---.

(Tomson 105)
The chapter has tried to analyse the construction of femininity in minority/resistance literature, where women are negotiating with triple oppressions in terms of race, class and gender. The ambiguity in the subject position of the Rez Sisters help to deconstruct the binary opposition of victim / victimizer as reflected in their response. The heterogeneity of response “eschews easy binary opposition between the purity of traditional mores and the abasement of assimilation” (Godard 214). In the play there is no resolution and the native women accept their “provisionality and partiality” (Godard 212). The interlocking of race and gender brings out the construction of gender race and patriarchy as culturally variable and how each structure is analogous and related to each other.