Chapter - II

Elucidating Native Reality
(The Rez Sisters)

Contemporary Native Canadian theatre portrays the fusion of mainstream and indigenous cultures in the making. Modern playwrights like Tomson Highway, forced to appropriate a genre alien to their native orators have incorporated the dramatic techniques of Euro-American postmodern theatre into the traditional sphere of ritual and storytelling. Highway practices bilingualism to strike a balance between the desire to express himself in his mother tongue Cree and the need for forced appropriation of the colonizers language English, with a view to reach a larger audience. His bilingual dialectics and dialogics result in “linguistic estrangements and paradoxes” (Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian writings 255) as Highway explains: “Cree is hilarious. When you talk Cree, you laugh constantly”. (Nanabush in the city.8). It is a visceral language in the sense that physiological functions become prominent in verbal banter. Cree is also a genderless language. Highway uses Cree along side of English to reflect native cultural values in contrast to Christian Eurocentric values i.e. “risible, sensual, genderless, articulation as opposed to somber, abstract, patriarchal discourse”. (Lines and circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 255). Highway substantiates by defining the Cree philosophy of life when he says: “This is
the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then the apocalypse … Human existence isn’t a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It’s a joyous celebration.” (Ferguson: Native Son. 18, 20).

Highway’s highly acclaimed first production The Rez Sisters reflects the Native Cree spirit. As Renete Usminai comments: “The Rez Sisters consequently shares all the surface aspects of western postmodernism but differs essentially in spirit … the essential humanism, life-affirming and hopeful world view of native people”(Les Belles-Soeurs Vs. The Rez Sisters in Canadian Literature. 127) in diametric opposition to the negativism, nihilism and the “Waste Land” like spiritual sterility of western postmodern society.

The Rez Sisters was first performed in 1986 at the Native Canadian Center in Toronto by the Act IV Theatre Company and Native Earth Performing Arts. It won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for the best new play performed in Toronto in 1986-87. It was short listed for the Floyd S.Chalmers Award as the outstanding play of 1986. It was also nominated for the Governor General’s Award. Usmiani elaborates: “The very emergence of a Native Dramaturgy represented a political act in 1998. [The Rez Sisters brought in its wake a veritable explosion of [Native]
theatrical activity.” (Les Belles Soeurs Vs. The Rez Sisters: Studies in Canadian Literature. 128). The play hailed as a cultural revolution resulted in a change of nomenclature from colonial to independently assertive i.e. from “Indian” to “Native” or “Aboriginal”.

_The Rez Sisters_ is a two act play set in the fictional Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. The cast comprises of seven women and a trickster figure Nanabush. The seven women are related by birth or marriage. 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 their luck at the Biggest Bingo Game in the World. Each woman has her own dreams of winning the Jackpot and fulfilling their long cherished desires. Pelajia wants to build a nice paved road leading up to her house. Philomena hopes for a new toilet big and wide and very white. Marie Adele wishes for the most beautiful incredible goddamman island in the whole goddamman world for her family. Annie hopes for enough money to buy every single one of Patsy Cline’s records and go to all the taverns and nightclubs in Toronto and listen to the live music. But there is also a solemn side to their adventure to the city, to seek medical help for Marie Adele who is stricken with cancer and is slowly dying. There is also a sub-
story, a recollection of the imbecile girl Zhaboonigan’s horrible rape by a group of white boys.

The climax of the play is a phantasmagoric Bingo Game where the ailing Marie Adele waltzes with the Bingo Master into her own death. The women return to the reserve where they had started. An important character is that of the Trickster figure Nanabush who is always present, hovering in the background transforming himself from a seagull to a nighthawk to the Bingo Master.

In a radical digression from the Native relativist “Fourth World” postmodern discourse of white colonial and post colonial atrocities and imperialist design to eliminate “Native Problem”, “The Rez Sisters” is an offbeat dramatization of the envisioned resurgence of Native cultures. This perspective is evident in the process of exploring the problems that destroy the native society, the obvious of self-destruction, an envisioned transformation gender roles and in Eurocentric stereotypes and discourses of colonization. Traditional assumptions of native women’s silence are broken, incorporating dialogue from kitchen gossip to western country music and singing to confession to snatches of inter-dialogue. As Highway states:

I think that every society is constantly in a state of change, of transformation, of metamorphoses. I think it is very important
that it continue to be so to prevent the stagnation of our imaginations, our spirits, our soul...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 the new 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. (Cultural Collision And Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature.2)

Highway employs super realistic theatrical elements of violence, scatology and sex in both dialogue and action to portray the negative consequences of culture collision played out in the lives of seven native women who belong to the native community of Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. As Highway indicated in his production notes to the play “Wasaychigan” means “window” in the Native language, Ojibway. Anne Nothof points out that: “The reserve functions in both places 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 of self-preservation.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature.1)
Highway’s choice of an all female cast as Renate Usmiani points out “underlines the oppression of the respective societies and their desire for empowerment.” (Les Belles-Soeurs vs. The Rez Sisters: Studies in Canadian Literature.128). But the play is different in the sense that as Jerry Wassessman remarks, “…The Rez Sisters offers an earthy comic vision of a world in which suffering is a daily reality, but by no means the primary one and in which sisterhood is powerful” (Tomson Highway: Modern Canadian Plays, Volume II. 184) The play is an introspective journey, peeling off the layers of the genocide and hegemonial experiences of native communities in colonial historicity to the pre-contact mythopoec a core where there was no gendered hierarchy or hierarchal order among native women. Primordial Native domesticity functioned on a sisterhood consciousness. In the play’s historical present, the same mythopoeia element is witnessed in the transitional awakening of The Rez Sisters primal sisterhood consciousness on which is based Highway’s vision of the resurgence of the Natives. As Highway explains: “Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the Native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation.” (Nanabush in the City.9) But before this can happen or “the healing can take place the poison must first be exposed …” (Dry Lips. 6). Highway’s portrayal of the seven Rez Sisters is to reveal the dignity, strength of
character and human superiority of Native Women or as Highway says to:
“make the Rez [reserve] cool, to show and celebrate what funky folk
Canada’s Indian people really are”, (*The Rez Sisters*). This stands
diametrically opposite to the Euro American subversive and caricatural
images of the “Injuns’ and their subaltern existence on the reserve similar
to that of the black peoples and their ghettos of Harlem and the Bronx in
post colonial racist America. The Wasychigan Hill Reserve in the play
administered by a ‘band’ (organized by the State for administrative
purposes) runs on a subsistence economy. The neglect and impoverishment
as glaringly visible in Pelagia Patchnose [the ‘elder’ sister] sees it in the
opening moments of the play. From her crow’s nest, “away up here” fixing
the roof of her house, hammering on new shingles with her silver hammer,
symbolic of her assertive nature observes, “Sure as I’m sitting away up
here on the roof of this old house. I kind of like it up here, though. From
here, I can see half of Manitoulin Island on a clear day. I can see the
chimneys, the tops of apple trees, the garbage heap behind Big Joey’s
dumpy little house. I can see the seagulls circling over Marie-Adele’s
white picket fence. Boats on the North Channel… I wish I was sailing
somewhere. The mill at Espianola, a hundred miles away … and that’s
with just a bit of squinting. See? If I had binoculars, I could see the super
stack at Sudbury. And if I were superwoman, I could see the CN Tower in
Toronto. All, but I’m just old plain old Pelajia Rosella Patchnose and I’m
here in plain, dusty boring old Wasaychigan Hill… Wasy… waiting…
waiting…nailing shining with my trusty silver hammer on the roof of
Pelajia Rosella Patchnose’s little two-bedroom, welfare house… (The Rez
Sisters.2)”.

As Anne Nothof points out, “Pelajia is well aware of the spiritual
and social problems on the Rez, and considers the possibility of a
revolution in which the white male authority of the church and state is
overthrown.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in
Canadian Literature.1)

She is a moderate version of Mardi Gras in Jeannette Armstrong’s
Slash. According to Noel Elizabeth Currie Mardi assumes that every
Indian has the personal and communal power to make a difference.
Political activism is hence a means of overcoming internalized as well as
material oppression.” (Jeannette Armstrong and the Colonial Legacy:
Canadian Literature.144). As Mardi contemplates in Slash, “The only way
that we can really regain control is for us to really change. It means that we
are going to rebuild our health mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We
are a long way from being totally in control. In fact we can’t even talk
about it, except we know that it is possible and that is what we are moving
towards”. (Slash, 218)
Her dissatisfaction at the sorry state of affairs on the Reserve is starkly evident when she expostulates: “Everyone here’s crazy. No jobs. Nothing to do but to drink and screw each other’s wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush. Moreover “the old stories”, “the old language” are almost gone.”(The Rez Sisters.6)

However as Anne Nothof points out, “[Pelajia] focuses on positive indicators of survival and empowerment, regardless of its origins, and she bullies and inspires the other six Rez sisters, all of whom struggle with ways to survive in a fragmented society.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 1)

The positive indicator of survival and empowerment comes in the form of the biggest bingo game in the world which activates the sisters long cherished dreams.

The women’s lifestyles and thought processes are dictated by gross consumeristic and materialistic desires whose fruition is dreamed in winning the jackpot in the game and as Usmiani explains: “clearly emphasizes the preeminently psychological reality of Bingo in the lives of the women.” (Les Belles-Soeurs vs The Rez Sisters. 129)

However the sisters linear materialistic self indulgences as Anne Nothof points out are “Primarily unconscious tactics for psychological
survival, providing a way of addressing physical needs and of ameliorating current living conditions.” *(Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 2)* For instance Pelajia the ‘elder’ wants a paved road leading right to her doorstep. As Johnson comments: “The dreams of… Pelajia are more difficult to fulfill. She is the natural leader of the group, a stern father figure in overalls brandishing her ever-present hammer… A sense of her own powerless and aimlessness in the community have brought on her current malaise to the point where she wants to abandon the reserve and move to Toronto. For Pelajia, the huge prizes in *The Biggest Bingo Game in the World* reanimate her dream of paving the roads on the reserve which would empower her leadership by demonstrating the wisdom of her proposals.” *(Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 257)* In fact Highway had modeled her character on that of his mother Pelajia Philomena Highway.

Her sister Philomena Moosetail is obsessed with procuring a large white toilet (she has a bowl disorder which has its comic implications). Towards the end of the play she is the only one who wins prize money at the bingo game. She fulfills her worldly dream, a grand new bathroom with a large toilet “spirit white” as centerpiece and as she ruminates: (so comfortable you could just sit on it right until the day you die!.” This finds its justification in the remarks of Johnson: “A key ingredient of
Philomena’s contentment, apparently, is to choose attainable dreams.” (*Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 257*). Their excitable half sister Annie Cook is infatuated with a Jewish country singer locally popular as Fitz the Katz, wants to posses the biggest gramophone player on which to play popular country music. Her sister-in-law Veronique wants to own the biggest stove on the reserve and dreams of publishing a cook book, a best seller. Another half sister Marie-Adele wishes for an island Shangri-La in Georgian Bay for her husband Eugene and her fourteen children and she describes it as “the most beautiful and incredible goddamn island in the whole goddamn world.” (*The Rez Sisters. 36*)

Though these self indulgences represent an accommodation with white mainstream culture and society, they do not address the consequences of cultural collision which are evident in the “so many things” that each of the women has to forget i.e. crippling memories of the physical, sexual and mental abuse which have a debilitating influence on their psyche.

The sisters’ enthusiastic and boisterous march to the Band’s council and their vociferous demand for funds for their trip to Toronto, the chief’s rejection of their oddball demand, the sisters frenetic activity to raise funds for their bingo trip, set the stage to transform the linear plot of the play into
cyclical character journey which awakens their primordial sisterhood consciousness. The characters “through-line” (theatrical terminology) makes the simple plot complex, revealing the terrible consequences of cultural collision in the women’s lives. Pelajia is isolated from her husband and sons who had left the reserve and settled in the city to earn their livelihood. During the night trip to the city, the sisters share their inmost feelings with each other. Philomena conceals her misery behind a façade of exuberance. Thirty years earlier, while employed as a secretary in Toronto’s garment district, she had an affair with a married white man ending in a split and an illegitimate child. Philomena had been forced to give up the child for adoption without even learning whether it was a boy or a girl. All that remains is a wistful maternal longing for the child.

Toronto. Had a good job in Toronto. Yeah. Had to give it all up. Yeah. Cuz mamma got sick. Philomena Margaret Moosetail. Real live secretary in the garment district. He’d come in and see my boss. Nice Man, I thought. That big, red, fish-tail Caddy. Down Queen Street, He liked me. Treated me like a queen. Loved me. Or I thought he did. I don’t know. Got pregnant anyway, Blond, blue-eyed six foot two. And the way he smelled. God! His wife walks in on us. He left with her. I don’t even known to this day if it was boy or girl. I’m
getting old. That child would be...28...28 years old.

September 8. (The Rez Sisters. 81)

Johnston remarks, “Philomena’s bluff good cheer is to some extent an act of will.” (Lines and Circles: Native Writers Canadian Writings. 255)

Marie Adele is stricken by ovarian cancer and is terribly anxious about the future, prospects of her husband and children. But what makes her desperate is her husband Eugene’s behavior towards her: “I could be really mad, just raging mad just wanna tear his eyes out with my nails when he walks in the door and my whole body just goes k-k-k-k... He doesn’t talk, when something goes wrong with him, he doesn’t talk, shuts me out, just disappears. Last night he didn’t come home. Again, it happened. I couldn’t sleep. You feel so ugly. He wakes in this morning. Wanted to be alone, he said. The curve of his back, his breath on my neck, “Adele, Ki-sa-gee-ee-tin-o-o-ma” (in Cree- Adele I love you) making love, always in Indian, only. When we still could. I can’t even have him inside me anymore. It’s still growing there. The cancer, Pelajia, een-pay-seek-see-yan (In Cree Pelajia I’m scared to death). (The Rez Sisters.96).

Picking up where she leaves, Emily Dictionary reveals her sordid story. She had suffered ten years of domestic violence and physical abuse at the hands of her alcoholic husband Henry Dadzinanare. “Look here…
I’ll tell you a few things. You see this first? You see these knuckles? You wanna know where they come from? Ten years. Every second night for 10 long ass-fuckin’ years that goddamman Yellow knife asshole Henry Dadzinnare come home to me so drunk his eyes was spittin’ blood like Red Lucifer himself and he’d beat me purple…The night he came at me with an axe and just about sank it into my spine, I grabbed one bag, took one last look at the kids and walked out of his life forever.” (The Rez Sisters)

For a while Emily drifts with a gang of Native lesbian bikers, becomes sexually intimate with the leader of her pack who embittered, kills herself in a head on collision with a truck which Anne Nothof interprets as: “a graphic symbol for the destructive force of dominant culture”. (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature.) Surviving the ghastly road accident Emily returns to the reserve: “Cruising down the coast highway one night,.. Rose. That’s Rosabella Baez, leader of the pack. We were real close, me and her. She was always thinkin’ leader deep. And talking’ about bein’ a woman. An Indian woman. And suicide. And alcohol and despair and how fuckin’ hard it is to be an Indian in this country. No goddamn future for them, she’d say. And why, why, why? Always carry’ in on like that. She was pretty heavy into the drugs. Guess we all were…. Cruisin’ down the coast
highway that night. Rose in the middle. Me and Pussy Commanda off to the side. Big 18-wheeler come along real fast and me and Pussy Commanda get out of the way. But not Rose. She stayed in the middle. Went head-on into that truck like a fly splat against a windshield… I drove on. Straight into that daylight. Never looked back. Had enough gas money on me to take me far as Salt Lake City. Pawned my bike off and bought me a bus ticket back to Wasy.” (The Rez Sisters. 97). The domestic trauma turns her to seek a lesbian relationship: “I loved that woman, Marie-Adele, I loved her like no man’s ever loved a woman. But she’s gone. I never wanna go back to San Francisco. No way, man.” (The Rez Sisters.97).

But after she comes back to the reserve she gets sexually intimate with Big Joey the Rez machoman and becomes pregnant. Her cyclical journey from being victimized to lesbianism and healing in relation to the Cree Philosophy of life is: “a continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force.” (Native Son. 18, 20) Fiske elaborates: “Imposing a sexist and racist regime on First Nations women, colonization simultaneously elevated male power within the decolonized community.” (Fiske- American Indian Culture &
Dworkin analyzing the physical violence inflicted on women by colonized men points out that: “the stigma of the prostitute (white Euro-American subversive image of the Native woman as sex object) allows the violent, the angry, the socially and politically impoverished male (native) to nurse a grudge against all women, including prostituted women. This is aggressive bias made rawer and more dangerous by the need to counter one’s own presumed inferiority.” (Dowrkin, Scapegoat. 325). The cultural collusive destruction of positive roles for First Nations men and their subsequent identifications with racially supremacist attitudes have resulted in a apocalyptic consequence for First Nations women resulting in large scale incest, rape and husband violence.

The horrific description of Zhaboonigan’s brutal rape by a gang of white boys dramatizes the sexual violence against Native Women. In a talk at the University of Victoria in 1992 Highway explained that the heinous crime against Zhaboonigan is based on an event which occurred in a small town in Manitoba. A young Native girl Helen Betty Osborne was gang raped and murdered fifty six times with a screw driver. Although the town people were aware of the incident, only one of the four white men was put on trial and received a very light sentence. A retarded Zhaboonigan recollects the horrific rape in her crazy prattle with the seagull/Nanabush at
a stage in the play when the other women are in a state of anarchic conflict. “Nanabush, still in his guise as the seagull, makes a grab at Zhaboonigan. Zhaboonigan begins talking to the bird” Are you gentle? I was not little. Maybe same size as now. Long ago it must be? You think I’m funny? Shhh. I know who you are. There, there, Boys. White boys. Two. Ever nice white wings, you. I was walking down the road to the store. They ask me if I want ride in car. Oh! I was happy I said, “Yup”-Took me far away. Every nice ride. Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here. [Pointing to her crotch, underneath her dress]. Many, many times. Remember. Don’t fly away. Don’t go. I saw you before. There, there, it was a screwdriver. They put the screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Every lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold. And then. Remember. Zhaboonigan. Everybody calls me Zhaboonigan. Why? It means needle. Zhaboonigan. Going through thing. Needle Peterson. Going-through –thing Peterson. That’s me. It was the screwdriver. Nice. Nice. Nicky Ricky Ben Mark. [As she counts, with each name, feathers on the bird’s wing]. Ever nice. Niche white birdie you.”

(The Rez Sisters.47, 48)

As Nothof elaborates: “Rape may function as a metaphor for the intrusive, destructive impact of one society on another in this play…but it is also a cruel fact.” (Cultural Collision & Magical Transformation:
Studies in Canadian Literature. 4). Zhaboonigan’s ordeal signifies a forced reconstruction of the native woman’s Euro-American colonial identity as the “Squaw”. Even in a postmodernist world, sexual violence against native women is one specific legacy of colonization. The white man’s impulse to sexually assault aboriginal women is a commodities not only because they are viewed as primitive but because they are female.

Pelajia the ‘elder’ wistfully longs for better living conditions and employment on the reserve the lack of which had forced her sons and husband to leave the reserve and settle down in the city to earn their livelihood. She too wants to leave the reserve. As part of the larger theme there is also the Native love for the land which is one of the main issues of the play, how the culturally displaced Native women learn to respect their homeland and weather the challenges that make their lives difficult, rather than to migrate to the city. Philomena exhorts Pelajia: “This place is too much in your blood. You can’t get rid of it. And it can’t get rid of you.” (The Rez Sisters. 4) Veronique is neglected and deserted by her beer swilling alcoholic bootlegger husband Pierre St. Pierre the ‘rez’ clown. However the humane superiority of Native women is reflected in Veronique’s response to her problems. She adopts the retarded young woman Zhaboonigan, chaperoning her and takes charge of the deceased Marie Adele’s family. Anne Cook’s crush on Eugene and her unrequited
love (Eugene marries her sister Marie Adele), her brief love affairs with them, develops in her a prejudice against native men resulting in her infatuation with a Jewish country musician popular locally by the name Fritz the Katz. This is obvious in her words: “Aw, these white guys. They’re nicer to their women. Not like Indian guys. Screw you drink all your money, and leave you flat on your ass.” (The Rez Sisters. 86)

The Rez Sisters fiasco at the BIGGEST BINGO GAME IN THE WORLD ending in Marie Adele’s death dramatized in the Bingo scene i.e. the Bingo Master/Nanabush waltzing with Marie Adele and escorting her away… brings them back to the reserve chastened, spiritually boded in the primordial sisterhood consciousness, and their priorities set right.

In a scene, the attitude of the women in the play towards life confirms to the Native mythological trickster figure Nanabush, to whom according to Highway human existence is not “a struggle for redemption” but a “joyous celebration” (Native Son. 18,20). In the play the Native spirit is celebrated through the theatrical “through line” representation of the trickster. Describing the person of Nanabush in the introductory note to the play, Highway says: “essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about nature and the meaning of existence on the planet earth: he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the great spirit.” (The Rez Sisters. 12) Nanabush is at once comical and serious, profane and
spiritual. Like the language Cree, he is genderless assuming male and female human forms, and also forms of birds and animals. Hovering in the background changing forms from a Seagull(with white feathers) and a Nanabush’s omniscient mysterious presence pervades the entire play. However he reveals himself to certain characters in the play like the mentally retarded young woman Zhaboonigan and Marie Adele (mother fourteen children a suggestive symbol of a flourishing Native culture) who seemed to possess extra sensory perception what the Native would term as a “vision experience”. Highway himself has claimed such a shamanic experience when he wrote in the preface to Geoffrey York’s The Dispossessed: “at all times I have had the trickster sitting beside me. In Cree we call him/her Weesaueechak…” (The Dispossessed: Looking at the words of Our people). According to Highway, the colonizers attempts to eliminate native religions and mythologies have only resulted in their surviving “more strongly” in the spirits of the Natives “who still feel a connection with God” (Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors. 90-91). The yearning of some of the characters in the play like the elder Pelajia Patchnose for Nanabush, could be interpreted as a wistful longing to embrace the positive values of love, mirth, and kinship which priomordial native cultures cherished. Describing the initial reaction to the play, Highway remarked: “I’m sure some people went expecting crying and moaning and plenty of misery, reflecting
everything they’ve heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised all that humour and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian Mythology” (Native Son, 18-20). A similar opinion is voiced by contemporary Native Canadian writer Thomas King: “Rather than create characters who are inferior and dying, Native writers have consciously created Native characters who are resourceful, vibrant and tenacious like traditional Trickster figures. Contemporary Native characters are frequently tricked, beaten up, robbed, deserted, wounded and ridiculed, but unlike the historical and contemporary life Native characters in white fiction, their characters survive and preserve and in many cases prosper. Contemporary Native literature abounds with characters who are crushed and broken by circumstances and disaster, but very few of them perish. Whatever the damage, contemporary characters like their Trickster relations rise from their own wreckage to begin again”. (Canadian Fiction 60.8)

The function of Trickster Nanabush as Anne Nothof elaborates is to “teach the meaning of existence on earth by embodying its many contradictions.” (Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: Studies in Canadian Literature. 3) In his various forms, Nanabush the Trickster in the play, transferences between antithetical worlds of white and black, hope and despair, comedy and tragedy, order and chaos, native and white
cultures. As Grant Agnes says: “the shape-shifting transformative powers of Nanabush are evident in his/her many manifestations” *(Native Drama: A Celebration of Native Culture. 110)* resulting in magical transformation. For instance the tragic death of Marie Adele is dramatized as a magical transformation in the play, from the physical world to the realm of the spirit. Raven, another Trickster in Lee Maracle’s *Raven song* advocates that death might be fearful and ultimate but is also transformative, a part in the continuous cycle of life. “Death is transformative, Raven said to earth from the depths of the ocean. The sound rolled out, amplifying slowly. Earth heard, she let the compelling power of them play with her sensual self. Her insides turned, a hot burning sensation flitted about the stone of her. Earth turned her, folded in on herself, a shock of heat shot through her. It changed her surface, the very atmosphere surrounded her changed.” *(Raven Song)*

The Trickster Nanabush first appears in the form of a seagull hovering in Marie-Adele’s yard playfully threatening to spoil her laundry and scaring her with his beady stares. He then appears as seagull to Zhaboonigan playfully scooping on her, allowing himself to be founded by her, as she confides to him about her brutal rape at the hands of a gang of white boys. Nanabush again appears to Marie- Adele on their night trip to the city as nighthawk (a manifestation of the Ojibway angel of death)
driving Marie-Adele into a paroxym of fear for herself and her family, attacking Zhaboonigan who comes to her rescue of Marie-Adel. He then becomes intimate with Marie-Adele in the form of the flamboyant Bingo Master who waltzes her away into the spirit world reincarnating at the last moment into a nighthawak. After having resisted death for so long Marie-Adele welcomes it in the same way that she had embraced life: “Oh, it’s you, so that’s who you are….come…don’t be afraid…Come to me… ever soft wings.” (The Rez Sisters.104)

Marie-Adele’s death serves as catalyst, changing the course of some of the sisters materialistic dreams. Veronique’s dream of possessing and ultramodern stove and publishing a bestselling cookbook becomes a transformative reality as she moves into the deceased Marie-Adele’s home, cooking and taking care of her sisters husband Eugene and her fourteen children. Veronique’s busy body image as a gossip, conceals her immense capacity to bestow love on anyone who are in the need of it. Emily Dictionary, coarse, tough talking and foul mouthed with a sordid story of terrible suffering, experiences healing in her transformation from a physically abused housewife to a lesbian lover, from sexual intimacy with Big Joey and her pregnancy to an affectionate sister to the mentally retarded Zhaboonigan, to the position of a caring expecting mother. Native Canadian writer Thomas King commends Highway’s ability to present the
Rez community as the intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a native sense of family. Playwright Carol Bolt remarks that watching the play makes the audience feel part of “an extraordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family” (No Wings Yet. 26) reflecting the Trickster’s philosophy of life. Nanabush thus patronizes as Usmiani elucidates: “the joyful, life-affirming spirit of Native mythology as well as a calm and fearless attitude to death.” (Les Belles-Soeurs vs The Rez Sisters. 138) Highway himself explains: “One superhero (Christ) is stating that we are here to suffer and the other (Trickster) basically says we are here to have a helluva good time… one was crucified, the other wasn’t so we have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about…” (Aboriginal Voices Amerindians, Inuit and Sami theatre. 134)

A significant move by Highway in the play is to include Emily Dictionary’s brief stint with a lesbian biker, her return to the reserve, her bisexuality and acceptance Native women give to one of their own, without any reservations. Native Canadian writing makes room for varied identities to interact with one another. Even the infamous Gazelle Nataways, the erotic object of the Rez mens sexual fantasies, is looked upon with amused disgust by the sisters.

Thus the survival and recuperation of sisterhood among native women whose communities have been subjected to hierarchical divisions
by the Eurocentric white patriarchal societies is stressed upon by Native writers like Highway as the survival and the development of Native societies in a multicultural frame work depends upon resurgence of their women. Usmiani makes an open ended statement echoing Highway’s hope for resurgence of Native cultures when she states: “Highway’s idealization of characters and retention of a humanistic value system indicates a society in which hope has not yet died.” *(Les Belles-Soeurs vs The Rez Sisters. 139)*

Highway indicates the same in the funeral speech given by Pelajia the elder at end of the play: “well, sister, guess you finally hit the jackpot. Best Bingo Game we’ve ever been to in our lives. Huh? You know, life’s like that, I figure when all is said and done. Kina Silly, isn’t, this business of living? But. What choice do we have?... I figure we gotta make the most of it while we’re here. You certainly did. And I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you. For me. For all of us. Promise. Really. See you when that big bird finally comes for me”. *(The Rez Sisters. 105)*

Pelajia’s speech also sets the stage for *The Rez Sisters* to assertively begin to breathe life into an otherwise existentialist and chaotic life of the Native Community of the Wasaychigan Hill Reserve. In a 1987 edition of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Daniel David Moses stated: “The majority of Native people, forced to inhabit ignored, economically disadvantaged 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”. *(Canadian Fiction 1987).* Against a backdrop of social depravity due to alcoholism, drug addiction, physical and emotional abuse and violence, psychological and social displacement and isolation, the seven women in the play, are not only survivors but who with gusty humor and tenacious optimism envision a better world and the prosperity of their community. The play is noted for its feydeauesque farce and open lyricism which functions as a catharsis of emotions, its chief function being to create an emotional rapport between the native characters in the play and their audience both native and white, and an intense sensual effort to convey their affirmation of life or live, of sex, of movement and of hope. Their emancipatory strivings as seen in their women’s ice hockey team enterprise in the next play Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing evokes an anti-response from the Rez men i.e. the conflict of sexual identities which will be discussed in the next chapter.

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