

**Victimized Woman in George Ryga's
*Ecstasy of Rita Joe***

Dr.S.Udhayakumar

*Assistant Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature,
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-21*

Abstract

This is a play by George Ryga, a Canadian playwright. This play was first performed in the 'Play House Theatre' at Vancouver in British Columbia in the year, 1967 November 23. 1967 is the year of the centennial celebration of Canada. Through this play George Ryga puts into work the conscience of the Canadian whites. The play was really meant to give the Canadian whites a rude shock. As expected, the play put to shame into the racks, the Canadian whites, who subjugated the natives. We also find that this play gained popularity, universal recognition and fame.

There was a tremendous response to the technical innovations of Ryga, who attempted to write a very modern drama at a time when Canadian drama was treated as a second class stuff. By writing this play, Ryga has provided to the world that Canadian drama has come of age and the Canadian dramatists can address the plays directly to the needs and aspirations of the Canadian theatrical community. This play provided the right impetus for the Canadian artists to move forward.

"Ecstasy" is a word usually used for saints. All saints attain this state after undergoing immense suffering. The heroine of the play, Rita deserves to be a saint as she is undergoing unexplainable sufferings till the end of her life. This paper analyzes how she is victimized to find the meaning of the title word 'Ecstasy'.

Genuine myth

George Ryga tried to create a genuine myth in the Canadian literature. He wanted it to be set as a model for generations to come. He writes his plays with his own experiences in real life. The people he uses in his plays are exploited people and also people who are exploiting them. Being exploited by the society, the people are alienated by the mass. These people cannot fight back. Though they are unsuccessful, they try. So Ryga's characters are un-heroic heroes. Ryga says that he is giving an accurate description of life condition as it is in real life. So Ryga writes only realistic plays, which speaks out the Canadian mind. The play is based on the actual incident, reported in the "Vancouver Newspaper" about a murder of an Indian girl whose body was found in a slum house. The slum was in the city.

The play tells the story of a girl, a native called Rita Joe. She was brought up in the reserves. It is an area reserved for these natives of Canada who are the suppressed people. Rita Joe leaves the reserves and her family for her freedom and for fulfillment. She is dissatisfied and goes to the city. And in the city she was caught by the police and they filed a case against her. The

charges posed against her were, "Prostitution, Theft, Vagrancy and Alcoholism". Finally in the end she was gang raped and murdered. All these information are facts that Ryga got from the "Vancouver Newspaper"

"Ecstasy" is a word usually used for saints. All saints attain this state after undergoing immense suffering. The heroine of the play, Rita deserves to be a saint as she is undergoing unexplainable sufferings till the end of her life. She fights till the end striving from the hard state of life. Her despair and state is portrayed in this play. How Ryga presents this play is the most interesting part. On an empty stage surrounded with a Circular Ramp, he shows Rita Joe. She is given by the court and the police eight hours to find people who will testify to her character. The persons she turned for help are 'her lover, father, priest, teacher and her sister'. These people belong to two different sets. One group consisting of the priest and the teacher refuses to help her; whereas the other group consisting of her father and her lover is not able to help her, however they try.

From Reserves to Urban

The central character of the play is called Rita and the title sums up the sufferings and the final glorious attainment of Rita Joe in the word "Ecstasy". This Rita of the play, who comes from the reserves, tries to preserve her 'Identity' and her 'Integrity'. So she fights against the oppressive and legal system of the society. This society is designed to destroy Rita's idea of the world. The legal system shatters her expectations about the world. "She came with a wish to catch butterflies, but she ends up only with Caterpillars ". It is she alone as one girl against the legal system. The priest is the representative of the whites and is a contrast to Rita. We expect the priest to be good but Rita is good and the priest is not. Jaimie, Rita's lover is also with Rita and he is the only supporter of Rita. Jaimie at one point says, "Give me back the real me; so that I can live like a man". We can apply this cry of Jaimie to Rita also. But Jaimie, who is confused with various ideas, undergoes psychological suffering and pained so much that he utters these words.

The judge who handles Rita's case says that, "the red Indians are a troublesome lot, a nuisance to themselves and to others". But this statement of the judge is more ironically suited to the whites in general. Homer, who runs a center, where she studied says, "I am running a center my way" declaring his oppressive ways. Rita and Jaimie who represent the exploited society are presented as martyrs and also as persons who die a heroic death after fighting a losing battle against an establishment, the bureaucracy which is bent on their destruction.

Rita is physically destroyed not spiritually, but her death transforms her into the Christian Ecstasy of sainthood. She could have avoided it by sacrificing her moral principles, but she does not do that. So the bureaucracy could only break her physical but not her high esteemed values.

Rita stands for affirmation of human values like dignity, honor, and integrity. Because she stood for these values they broke her. But she does not compromise on her values at any cost. That is why she was doomed and victimized. Because Rita was a Red Indian, she was doomed

from her very birth. She was born into a society which was oppressed. She was doomed to live. She underwent both physical destruction and spiritual resurrection.

At one situation Jaimie says, "What the hell is the use of living?" This one statement summarizes the painful state of natives. Yet Jaimie still struggles on in spite of the frustration, depression and struggle. They both struggle till the end and braving the current to live and finally attain the 'Ecstasy' of sainthood.

Life of Suffering

They give full respect to the life that God gave thereby fighting till the last. This is a better prayer they do. Though they do not believe in God, they endure all sufferings till the very end and at last like a mystic commune with God. All the accusations against Rita Joe, placed by the magistrate and Homer are only excuses and not facts. The accusations are only excuses for still more isolating the natives and finally destroying them. Once Homer, Rita's teacher gives her a sweater, not out of charity. Rita throws it off as she does not want to be suppressed. She prefers to suffer in the city. The suffering and hardships she undergoes helps her to attain sainthood.

All of Rita Joe's positive qualities only end her up in destruction. When she dies, it is her self-affirmation, integrity, dignity, honor and freedom attaining 'Ecstasy'. When Rita dies and her soul soars in high, Ryga writes towards the end of the play,

"O the singing bird
Has found its wins
And it's souring
My God! What a sight
On the cold, fresh wind of the meaning".

This symbolizes that Rita is flying in the height of Ecstasy of freedom, integrity, honor, self-affirmation, dignity and sainthood. As title revolves around this experience of the central character in Rita, it is very apt and appealing.

The **Ecstasy of Rita Joe** brought George Ryga international recognition far beyond the confines of Canadian Theatre. On the empty stage enclosed by a circular ramp, Ryga depicts Rita's despair and suffering. Rita's father offers the parable of the caterpillar's metamorphosis into a dragon fly and its flight far into the sky. Though the comparison is irrelevant to the sufferings of Rita and by extension to the sufferings of all the victimized minorities all over the world, this parable puts in a nutshell the essence of the whole play. Their cast in the play is in the form of a morality play. The characters are divided into good and evil. Rita's father, lover and sister are the good characters while the police, the teacher, the magistrate and Mr. Homer stand for evil. When the two great institutional forces are brought into collision, tragedy is the inevitable result. The play is about the absence of understanding on the part of the government and the alienated and victimized Rita. Rita does not understand the white man, his laws, his institutions and its social structure. The white does not understand the plight of the native Indians. When such a situation arises, disaster is the inevitable end and no one is able to prevent it.

Spiritual Triumph

The play predicts a woman's odyssey through the hell in search of her name and identity. Though the play starts with a typical Canadian situation Rita's sufferings make the play universal. Rita takes her place in the tradition of an outsider struggling to preserve her identity and integrity fighting against an oppressive social and legal system all of which are totally designed to destroy Rita's individuality. Ryga presents a contrasting picture while dealing with the lives of the white Canadian's and the native Indians. The priest and the magistrate, the representatives of the institutions of religion and law respectively say that, the Indians are troublesome and nuisance. Mr. Homer who represents the charity institution condemns the Indians as drunkards and useless people. Even the teacher who is representative of the educational system condemns Rita as a whore even when she is in the fourth grade. On the other side there are people like Rita and her lover who are presented as martyrs and die a heroic death fighting against an establishment which is bent upon their distraction though she is doomed to lead a victimized life from birth and finally crushed physically, she triumphs spiritually in the end.

The crux of the play is the dichotomy between the two opposed views on social behavior. There seems to be difference in the perception between the much publicized ideas of the white society and their actual practice. Ryga says through the play that the white society is indifferent to the sufferings of the people of other ethnic and minority groups. The White's liberal lip service does not really alleviate the sufferings of the Native Indians living in Canada. Nothing concrete is done to improve the social, economic and cultural status of the marginalized people coming from other ethnic backgrounds. The play clearly is a pointer which shows that the Canadian society is a racist society. But their self- image was totally different to the outside world. The Canadians professed their belief in equality. They said that everyone has the right to live and pursue joy. But their establishment didn't grant these goals and they perpetuated the discrimination.

The Lip Service

The trial is central to the action of the play. The audience is made to witness the trial going on in the court of law. Poor Rita is made undergo the mental anguish and the real culprits are allowed to go free (the murders). The dominant White society wants to treat the Indians as second class citizens and keep them in the reservations. They don't want any change to be brought in the economic and social conditions of the Indians. Ryga attacks the White law courts which set the men free and imprisoned the woman. He attacks even the church. God is a White man's god. He also attacks the liberal lip service that the White man does. But the Canadian government does not do anything really tangible to improve their condition. The White society does not have either the will or the heart to improve the social status of the Indian living in Canada.

One sees in the play Rita's inability to understand and assimilate the accusations of the White witnesses. The magistrate tells Rita "The obstacles to your life are here in your thoughts... possibly even in your culture", He suggests that she should fix her hair, tame her accent and

change her name. Rita feels that she will not be saved even if she does so. She gets no help either from the priest or from the magistrate. Her father is too weak to protect her. When he comes to take her to the reserve, she refuses to go. She can't go back to the rural past. The present urban atmosphere doesn't offer any help. At this juncture, the circular ramp which comprises the stage becomes an accurate symbol of her plight. It stands for her meaningless journey towards death.

One of Ryga's few themes is that of the true and false fathers. David Joe has been a loving and responsible parent. She remembers how her father refused to sell her for thousand dollars. This is contrasted with Clara Hill who sells her children to the welfare agencies. There are number of false fathers in the play like the priest, special worker, Homer, the store manager and magistrate. They betray Rita. All these false fathers are impersonal and are only concerned with the rules and regulations. They want Rita to conform to the existing social conditions. The teacher and the social worker Mr.Homer grudgingly try to help Rita but they only want her to be kept subjugated under their care and control. Mr. Homer offers a red sweater to her which is thrown away by Rita. She even allows herself to be seduced by the tyre store manager in order to get some money to go back to the reserve in order to see her sick father. The magistrate is the epitome of a false father in the play. In the beginning he appears to be kind and greatly concerned for Rita's welfare. But with every subsequent appearance, he grows more and more hostile towards her and finally condemns her as a social leper, carrier of venereal diseases. All these accusations are merely excuses for isolating her further from the white Canadians. For Rita, freedom and integrity are vital though they bring destruction to her. It is this aspect of her character that explains the title of the play. Rita's death ends in the ecstasy of the self-affirmation, integrity, freedom and her. Thus Ryga delineates the plight of the Indians in Canada in tragic terms.

Again in Ryga's theatrical world, the circular ramp with cyclorama with no permanent props is symbolical. It suggests the circularity of the play's actions. Ryga has introduced the ballad singer a brechtian device whose songs forebode the inevitability of Rita's death. She is the alter of Rita. She is described as "a white liberal folklorist". The use on this device not only makes the audience understand and accept their collective social responsibility in bringing out Rita's destruction. The events are not linked in a logical sequence but by Ryga's memory and emotional association. The songs give an emphasis to the emotional aspect of the play. The inter relatedness of Rita's memory and her emotions becomes apparent by the songs and their repetition. Ryga incorporated in this play the device of the stream of consciousness technique which is the traditional device used by a novelist or a poet. Ryga also gives importance to music which has made the play an exciting piece of the theatrical performance.

'The Ecstasy of Rita Joe' was first performed in "The Play House Theatre" in Vancouver in British Columbia on Nov 23, 1967. It was directed by George Bloomfield. The music was composed by Ann Mortifee and lyrics were composed by George Ryga. Stage setting and lightning by Charles Evans, Costumes by Margaret Ryan. The bitter irony is that the play was staged during the centennial celebrations of Canada's independence in 1967. He puts the conscience of the

Canadian whites on the racks by holding them squarely responsible for all the ills and the degraded state of the society. The play came as a rude shock to the Canadian whites.

Conclusion

George Ryga is an outstanding image in Canadian literature. The Ecstasy of Rita Joe brought Ryga international recognition far beyond the confines of Canadian theatre. The title of the play is significant because the play ends with her achieving the greatest state or feeling of the joy for sainthood. Even though Rita dies, she has become a saint who died striving for a relief from the hard state of life. The title sums up the suffering and the final glorious attainment in the word 'Ecstasy' by being a victim of White Canadian society. Victimization brings her Ecstasy.

Works Cited

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