

EXCAVATING THE CULTURAL AND RACIAL ENCOUNTERS IN GEORGE RYGA'S INDIAN

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ABSTRACT

The term drama refers to a literary genre consisting of texts written for both readings as well as staging in the theatre. The Canadian drama consisting of a range of forms is shaped by the Canadian colonial experience, various social, cultural and political forces, the rise of nationalism etc., which are generally taken to affect the arts and literature. The 19th century saw the emergence of closet drama in Canadian literature. At the end of this century, the poetic dramatists started using indigenous subjects. After WWI, Canadian one-act plays gained prominence as the predominant form of the time. In the 1960s and 1970s, the playwrights like John Coulter, James Reaney, George Ryga, Beverley Simons, influence the Canadian play writings greatly. In the early 1960s, George Ryga became a public figure with his first play 'Indian'. The present research aims to unveil the cultural differences the characters encounter, several racial encounters which result in racial despair and racial discrimination in the lives of the native Indians of the play Indian. This study also analyses the themes of segregation and alienation of the working-class native Indians, the problem of belonging the characters face in Indian. Besides, this paper will highlight the aspects of subjugation of the ethnic minorities, the plight of the Indians, various modes of resistances the oppressed class laborers raise in the play Indian.

KEYWORDS: *Cultural Differences, Racial Despair, Indigenous, Discrimination, Segregation, Alienation, Belonging, Subjugation, Ethnic Minorities, Resistances*

INTRODUCTION

*"Race can produce simplified interpretations of complex social, economic and
Cultural relations for antiracists as well as racists."*

Donald & Rattansi, 3

George Ryga (1932-1987) is one of Canada's pre-eminent playwrights. He was a very prolific writer in the 1960s and 1970s. He has authored more than twenty plays, most of which are published in an anthology called "George Ryga: The Other Plays". This anthology consists of sixteen plays by Ryga. Most of the plays of the anthology discuss the themes of human struggle, cultural differences, racial discrimination and other important themes. These plays also address the issues of Canadian identity. Ryga has been able to hold an enduring position in the larger, ongoing construction of post-colonial Canadian culture. The main concern of his plays is to focus on the struggle and suffering of the ordinary, working class people. Hoffman remarks:

"He demonstrates a passion for what he called "ordinary people," a somewhat complex term that for him referred primarily to hard-working people closely connected to the land as a source of their living and heritage; a people who necessarily involved in the political struggle against oppressors who would deny them, in very literal terms, the fruits of their labor." (21)

Ryga himself saw the struggle the working-class people do when he was living in a "hardscrabble farming environment in northern Alberta, by Ukrainian immigrant parents. Hoffman comments in another place about Ryga's association with the ordinary people:

"Ryga's deep association with the ordinary people, especially in their struggle to surmount colonial, racist, and classicist barriers to the fruitful and productive exercise of their work, such as they continue to exist in western Canada, gives his work an explicit political underpinning." (21)

George Ryga, despite being non-native, has delicately depicted the plights of the native Indians in Canada in his play *Indian*. This play focuses upon the struggle between the laborers and the white employer, the suffering of the working-class people and their resistance. It also discusses several cultural encounters the characters are to or have to face throughout their lives. The racial encounters also take a significant space in the play. While talking about the themes his plays deal with, Hoffman remarks that his plays deal with "a romantic attraction to the land and the people who live close to it and a profound alienation from that same land- the ownership of which is often in question." (21) In *Indian*, Ryga has put forth the protagonist Indian's inner conflict between the culture of the white society and his own. The white society imposes their own culture upon the colonized people. They want them to follow the culture of the colonizer. Fred Dallmayr comments:

"Apart from colonial expansion in foreign lands, cultural hegemony may also be exercised in a "domestic" (that is, politically more or less settled) context and, in this case, may involve the spreading of diffuse, cultural patterns or ways of life (of religious and/or secular vintage); the targets of such hegemonic outreach is typically marginalized ethnic, national, or linguistic groups (sometimes composed of immigrant populations)." (14)

The play *Indian* concerns itself with the notion of cultural encounter in terms of ethnicity, hybridity, alienation, marginalization, displacement, otherness, etc. The characters encounter cultural differences between the labourers and the employers, the minorities and the majorities, the ordinary people and the government agencies. As *Indian* is inspired by Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, Hoffman very rightly has observed that "Indian, like *The Zoo Story*, pits one of society's outcasts against the smug complacency of his oppressors." (22) The protagonist is a nameless native Indian who first appears as colonial society's cliché of the "shiftless Indian". (22) It is about an encounter between a transient native Indian

working-class man and an official of the Government. The native Indians are exploited by the white society's commercial exploitation.

In *Indian*, Ryga has tried to uncover several kinds of cultural and racial encounters the Indian undergoes throughout his life. Cultural encounter refers to social relations among the people, places, and objects. To maintain a good social relation, one needs to possess the sense of mutual adjustment and learning of social harmony. Cultural encounter invokes cultural translations, the meaning of borders, authenticity, transcultural processes.

"... The conception of cultural difference in terms of distinct cultural domains
Is increasingly questioned: 'With expanded communication and inner cultural
Influence, people interpret others and themselves in a bewildering diversity of
Idioms- a global condition of what Mikhail Bakhtin (1953) called"
heteroglossia". (Hallam & Street)

The protagonist Indian encounters cultural identity crisis. He is a laborer employed by the official of the Indian Affairs Department. He is seen wearing "dirty dark shirt" which is "brightened by outlandish western designs over pockets." (25) Watson is also seen giving warning to the native Indians, expressing his apprehension of not getting works from the laborers. Watson talks about Roy's wooden leg which is actually dried up. Indian feels cultural affection for Roy as an ethnic group and defends him as a dried-up leg, rather than wooden leg. He says, "... Roy, he's not got the wooden leg. He got bone leg same's you an'me. Only it dried up and look like wood." (25)

Alphonse, Indian's nephew, encounters cultural anxiousness in a materialistic society. He is a child and has not yet known the outside world. He is not so aware of the adult's fight or conflict. When he sees Sam and Roy engaged in a fight, he runs away and tells Watson that Sam and Roy were drunk and wild.

Indian: ...He runs away when Sam and Roy start fight...

Watson: Yeh, he run away... run all the way to the house. Told us you guys were drunk and wild." (25)

The play *Indian* is based on the playwright's own experience with the Cree Indians on his father's farm in Alberta. While talking about the cultural attitudes of the Cree Indians and the racial discrimination caused by the white people, Parker says, "They were transient laborers, gay, naïve, open-hearted to the verge of being self-destructive." (xi) Here in *Indian*, Ryga attempts to draw the attention of the audience towards his own experience and also towards what he thought in a marginalized society of the native Indians. Racially discriminated and culturally alienated Indian resists against the ruling government of the white class. His resistance is not of wild, rather passive. Indian inquiries about Agent's job salary and being embarrassed, the latter asks Indian to shut up. But Indian insists on telling like that and expresses his resistance like this:

"You wanna hit me? Come on ... hit me! You kill me easy, an' they arrest you

– Same people who give your car. Hit me-even little bit- come on! You coward!

Just hit me like this! (Slaps his palms together) ... Just like that- come on! You

Know what I do when you hit me? (29)

Indian becomes furious at Watson. In other words, broadly speaking, Indian's resistance like this arouses the pity for the white people who think of themselves as responsible for attributing the native Indians to marginalized people. Indian now defies the white culture and raises his voice against the oppression caused by the white Europeans. He warns Agent of reporting for beating Indian. The racial despair imbued in the mind of the Indian now finds a way to be expressed through resistance. There should be raised a question from the suffered people – how long will they be oppressed, exploited and deprived of their privileges, by the white society? No hope the oppressed people may find but they will surely keep resisting against the oppression. Indian goes one level further and frightened Agent, "I report you for beating Indian an' you lose a job." (29)

Indian focuses upon the plight of the native Indian laborers. They are prey to the colonizers who exploits them culturally, socially, economically, politically, and, also psychologically. The cultural affectation which dissects the people into two cultural differences and affects the sound sense of a person as is seen in Watson's activities when he locks the kid inside provided that the laborers feel bound and could not run away before completing the given task. Watson says,

"I got your kid in the grainery, locked up so he'll keep. You try to run off after your pals, an' I'm gonna take my gun an' shoot a hole that big through the kid's head!" (26)

Indian claims himself to be a faithful worker for Watson. The social adaptability of a person helps him or her to go beyond the complexity of culture and race. Though Indian is culturally and racially segregated from the normal living, he is a faithful worker for those who, he knows, exploit them. He is a creation of human race which is beyond any narrowly defined race. Watson takes Indian's faithfulness as his excuse for not going out due to over drink. This raises the difference between cultural environment and racial discrimination which naturally affects one's life.

Indian: Boss – you know me. I work! The other guys is no good – but not Johnny. I make the deal – I keep deal! You see yourself I stay when they run.

Watson: Sure, ya bastard. You were too goddamned drunk to move, that's why you stayed! What goes on in your heads ... ah, hell! You ain't worth the bother! (26)

Cultural encounter breeds the concept of 'othernesses, an important postmodern aspect. Understanding cross-cultural representation entails not only a self-reflexive and historical awareness of academic modes of production but also an analysis of the ways in which 'others' have themselves translated and subverted. Watson charges Indian to work mindfully. He also tells him not to waste any more time. Indian informs him that he is drinking Indian whiskey. Watson becomes confused on hearing the kind of Indian whiskey and he asks Indian about the Indian whiskey. It becomes clear that Watson has never heard of this whiskey before. This whiskey is made "only for Indian". Here, Indian is framed as 'other' in drinking too. Indian says, "Indian whiskey ... That's the kind of whiskey they make for Indian." (27) The 'otherness', a resultant of racial discrimination, is also put into the sense of belongingness. Indian asks Watson whether the latter would serve him food. On hearing this, Watson laughs sarcastically and rejects the very idea of feeding Indian. He also makes Indian feel 'other' when he says,

"Feed ya? Soon's I get my ten bucks squared away, you can lie down and die!

But not in my field ... go on the road allowance." (27)

Ryga has depicted the issues of racial despair and racial discrimination, sense of belongingness, identity crisis in his play *Indian*. When a person becomes a victim of racial discrimination, s/he feels alienated from the society. In *Indian*, the protagonist is in despair for not finding his proper existence in the society. He tries to hide his identity as he is in fear of being caught by the colonizers. Though he is in search of his inner self, he insists on not disclosing his name. Robert G. Dunn comments:

"Reflective of identity crisis is a widespread reckoning with the historically Subjugated identities of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other Subordinated social categories and groupings." (4)

The protagonist Indian is nameless defining himself to be the representative of the native Indians laborers. The Agent asks Indian's name to settle the matter of the laborers. To Agent, Indian denies telling his name. But the matter of fact is that he possesses no name at all as he is undergoing through the identity crisis.

Agent: (angrily) Give me your name!

Indian: Mebbe I forget Mebbe I got no name at all." (28)

Later, Agent warns him of not getting Indian benefits if Indian does not tell his name. Indian twists his name again and again and it may be justified as the ethnic minorities are deprived of all kinds of privileges.

The culturally as well as racially marginalized people are defined by the difference which is marked by race and gender. The dominant group or the oppressor class exploits the marginalized people by virtue of the difference in race or culture. The marginalized native Indians in *Indian* are disempowered. They are robbed of their cultural heritage, social status, and are led to racial despair. Indian is described as "drunken, undependable and lazy" – the white society use for the Indian. Watson is more malign with Indian than the nameless Agent. The Agent is a white liberal who finds his ethics abused by Indian's mercy killing of his brother. In the beginning, Indian seems to be a racist cliché. But, later on, his character is revealed. He suffers from racial despair. He does not find anyone to listen to him. On being asked what he wants from Agent, he expresses his personal despair, saying,

"I want nothing from you – jus' to talk to me – to know who I am. Once you go into a car, I am outside again." (29)

One's cultural identity is recognized by exemplifying one's ethnic group. The difficulty of cultural production within the colonial set-up is inflamed by the abhorrence shown by the white society which transpires into racial conflict. The native Indians are not supposed to use boots as they are ethnic minorities, henceforth they should not dare to defy the colonizers' orders. Indian in *Indian* feels the consequences of cultural and racial discrimination he encounters. He sees his existence as 'nobody'. From the notion of 'no', Indian raises his voice against those who have not given him the right to claim his identity as 'I'.

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