

Tomson Highway's Play the Rez Sisters: A Structural Analysis

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Abstract

This paper argues that Tomson Highway structures The Rez Sisters, in form and content to be as an example on how the native Canadians oppress themselves and therefore fail to materialize their dreams. The sisters abandon hard work which is the most crucial requirement to gain any progress in life. The paper tries to approach the Rez sisters with reference to the Loman's in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman to demonstrate that failure has nothing to do with race or color, but rather to the absence of hard work.

Keywords: drama, literature, Canadian drama, Tomson Highway, The Rez Sisters

Contrary to most of the critical canon on native Canadian literature which argue that the natives are presented as oppressed by the society and the system, heaving the blame on 'the whites' as in George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1970), this paper argues that Tomson Highway structures *The Rez Sisters* (1988) in form and content to be as an example on how the native Canadians are not only oppressed by the system, but they take the further step of oppressing themselves and therefore fail to materialize their dreams. The sisters abandon hard work which is the most crucial requirement to gain any progress in life. The paper compares the rez sisters to the Loman's in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) to demonstrate that failure has nothing to do with race or color, but rather to the absence of hard work. We use Derrida's notion of Western Metaphysics to show that Highway reverses the metaphysical hierarchy being/non-being to seemingly reveal most of the play, the bingo activities, as real and actual. Attentive and deep reading of the play reaches the remarkable conclusion that the fund-raising scene, the loan scene, and the bingo scene are dreamy and fictional, which are very real for the natives. Therefore, changing them into dreams, Highway condemns such activities as devastating because they always remain unreal and hinder any progress or improvement¹. Thus, as a deconstructor, Highway proves to be a genius playwright because he demonstrates that what seems to be very actual, real, valuable is in essence highly fictional and dramatic. Thinking in Derridian terms, the rez sisters, tormented by mythical past and the realistic future, live right in the "rupture" between the two. They try to reach a point of stability where they can center their lives. The first signified which keeps hovering over them is Nanabush pulling them to the lost past, and the second signified is the Bingo with all its future manifestations of financial promises.

Readers of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* are in no need of historical references or capitalistic theories to find out how fractured the lives of the sisters are. The personal history of the sisters tells the story of the red Indians who stand as an excellent example on Derrida's decentering (Derrida, 1991, p.p. 517-534). Working like a deconstructor, Highway divides his play into two parts. Part one consists of the opening and the closing scenes of the play, where the sisters stick to their place Pelejia represents the sisters in her hammering in the first scene and in the final scene when she laments all the agonies of their lives as real Indians. It is noticeable how highway makes this supposedly very long part remarkably short. Their long past, with Nanabush as a sample and a signified, has become useless and hopeless. Now the new signified which could take the sisters into the future is worth trying. Henceforth, the "Bingo" middle is made very long. It also proved futile and hopeless. The sisters therefore always move on a very shaky ground. Neither the "Nanabushian" past nor the "bingoan" future lead to a stable centered present. Formally speaking, the seemingly stable, very short, beginning at the play soon engulfed by a swarming movement of the sisters to, surprisingly, the crazy of the Bingo. As we shall see, the sisters are always in a great hurry. Every bit of their time in hilarious. Mentally and physically they live on a "frying pan" (Peel, p.p. 62-64). Initially, the overly heightened fun and the black comedy of the sisters overwhelm readers. Soon we discover the underlying horrible worries of the sisters.

A strange mixture of seriousness about the Bingo and an awareness of the very slim hope to get anything gives way to the old signified (Nanabush) to call the tune ending the action with killing the rapid action of the play leaves no chances for any centering or stability. Even the Sassuarian repetition, which might lead to a metaphysical stability, is lost and the sisters keep moving. The Bingo mission is at one level actual down to earth activity. But in the case of the sisters it turns into a kind of meta-fictional activity. We find the sisters so close to the real so “natural”, but soon become too fictional, too unreal. As explained later, the “loan” scene and its consequences of selling prove to be fictional within the play itself as a fictional text. Highway’s *Rez Sisters* is a masterpiece on how intricate and complicated the present and the future of the “Red Indians”. The sisters represent a difference between the “Being” they dream of and the “Non-Being” they live. They do not even enjoy the repetition of any metaphysical “truth” or center. But anyway like Highway himself, they should keep trying and never lose hope. Highway put them in a point where it is in vain and too late to blame anybody or anything. The brightness of their sense of humor might become their metaphysical centering or truthfulness. The *Rez Sisters*’ action revolves in full circle beginning and ending with Pelajia nailing and hammering the roof of her little house. Pelajia and her sisters have had one top priority in mind: to attend “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD” in Toronto. What complicates things and reveals how fragile their lives are, is to borrow money for the trip: to bingo with a loan (59). The seven sisters, including Pelajia, the builder, are entirely uprooted in terms of building and achievement or in any sense of normal life. Their chaotic life detaches them from the reservation and the outside world, which is for them the biggest bingo in the world. And when they choose to escape the miserable life of the rez, they end up in a bingo hall. Nanabush with all its connotations, spiritual and non-spiritual, accompanies them all the time and materializes their inner selves, positioning them within a time and place contexts (Johnston, pp. 254-64). Since time and place are meaningless to the sisters, Nanabush cannot do otherwise.

Tomson Highway uses a being-non-being formula to dramatize the life of the sisters. Being in the play is non-sensical and trivial (King, 6-15). The sisters spend their time doing nothing. In terms of achievement and progress, the real and the actual always boil down to nothing, to non-being. Much is said but as always leads to nothing. Hammering turns to be a world that never materializes into building. Their speeches include a lot of daydreaming, a non-being, if materialized it would be making things happen. Therefore, what could be meaningful is what is not. This reversal of discourse in the play allows for exotic dramatization. Added to this is dreamy world of Nanabush. Neither Nanabush, nor their way of life, or the bingo would bring them to fulfilling their dreams. The way out, the non-being, would always hover over them as language and music that would never materialize without hard work. Whatever they said, sad, or might say cursing life, history, or the coming future, would never change anything. Hard work, real constructive hammering would be the only way out. Even if they get another loan, and another, and go to another “biggest bingo in the world” they will not get an inch further. The hilarious and the painful combine in *The Rez Sisters*, the one to forget, the other to remember. The sisters always try to keep a “down to earth” sense of humor as a defense mechanism to hang to life. Whenever they change into serious empty rhetoric they are in great pain. The questions, which impose themselves, on the whole play is: what to do? how to begin? What’s next? It takes them great time and effort try, seemingly, serious and major steps forward. They spend long hours, and pages, to prepare for the trip. Financially, of course, they put an extra burden on their shoulders, the loan, to secure money for the unfruitful trip. Getting the loan and going to the bingo are the two major themes Highway uses to throw the sisters into the “white” Canadian life, society, and system (Enright, pp. 22-27). Whether they like it or not, they have become an inseparable part of the system.

Refusal to participate, or rather selectivity in choosing, in the Canadian system would always result in chaotic life for the non-participants. This applies not only to Red Indians but also to white Canadians. A good example on the non-fulfillment of the American and Canadian Dream is Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, where Willy Loman and sons Biff and Happy, White Americans, pretend to be hard working and moral, like the rez sisters they are talkative, spend their lives talking about success. Miller brings in contrast Bernard and Charley who talk less, work hard, and become moral and successful. A father, Willy destroys himself and his family, thinking that it will do just to pretend to be successful. Despite what the Red Indians historically went through, the American system and society always demands hard work for any individual to make personal progress. Blaming others leads nowhere. This is rather a universal truth that applies to individuals and nations. The question raised in *The Rez Sisters* and *Death of a Salesman* is not moral ones. Rather they are pragmatic and practical. Like Miller, Highway prevents the characters from changing the whole matter of failure in their life to a moral failure on the part of the society.

At the beginning of *The Rez Sisters*, the sisters do practically nothing, borrow money to try their luck in the bingo. At the end of the play the sisters are going to the Espanola bingo (115). Pelajia, a false builder who starts the play and ends it tries to change her and her sisters' position into a moral one: Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we've ever been in our lives, huh? You know, life's like that I figure. When all is said and done. 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. You certainly sis. 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. (105)

Pelajia says this towards the end of the play. This sounds like a challenge. A new beginning to "make the most of it". It only takes Pelajia a short while after to decide, with her sisters, to go to the next-week Espanola bingo (115). This apparently endless pursuit of pure luck and "fortune" forestalls any sympathy with the sisters on moralistic grounds. In a similar move, Miller explicitly divides the American dream into four major stages each of which is a compulsory prerequisite for the other: hard work, less talk, morality, and success. Highway's personal life story is a stunning example of agonies that was culminated in a story of great success. using the "we" pronoun, Highway summarizes what should the rez sisters have done: "we can only think of ourselves as victims for so long" (Lutz, p.46-50).

Unlike Highway, the rez sisters succumb to "historical" victimization. The worst part is that they add to it self-victimization. They, consciously or unconsciously, marginalize themselves. They give full lead to Bingo. Randomness. Obviously, the Bingo industry is moving ahead. Growing. the rez sisters are and remain to be flat characters. No exceptions. With no change, no growth, no learning, and no development they, at the end of the play start all over again. Unfortunately after trying doing nothing for a long time but to loose at the bingo, the sisters re-enter the vicious circle, planning to go to the Espanola bingo "next week". No wonder that *The Rez Sisters* critic give one word definition to each of them. A reviewer in *See Magazine*, October 2005, commenting on an October 22 staging of *The Rez Sisters* complains of the rigidity of the opening and closing scenes: Powerful though, *The Rez Sisters*, it suffers from a sense of dramatic inertia in the structure. In this play of life and death, Highway has utilized a spiraling, circular form the sweeps its characters into a whirlpool of emotion, spitting them out where they started, with the spiritual status quo restored it is an intriguing tactic, and effective in getting the main crust of the story across. What happens, unfortunately? is that many of the opening and concluding scenes suffer from a lack of dramatic tension This reviewer is perfectly right. But (very narrow and very deep) the short "grooves" at the beginning and the end are exactly needed for the "immeasurably focused performances of the middle of the play". "boring, rigid, "killing" as they are, the beginning and ending scenes make the highly dramatic, big middle possible. The basic simple, ideas at the beginning and end like Pelajia "plain, dusty boring old Wassaychigan Hill...Wasy....waiting....waiting...." (2) And "I'm tired...tired of this place." (3). Philomena's answer that their life on the reservation is an inescapable destiny: "you can't get rid of you". (4) These and other complaints concerning poverty, helplessness, and hopelessness reappear at the end when the sisters return empty-handed to the rez preparing themselves for another bingo game. Thematically the deep groove in the play is actually the big middle where the girls to make a pseudo attempt: improve their lives through winning the big pots. the big middle of the play is consumed in preparing for the bingo and the long way to the most of the play (roughly pages 13-103) is bring dominated. The short ending scene (104-118) is "almost" bingo-free. Playing with words we can safely call the girls "The Bingo Sisters". Try solving all their life problems through pure luck. The "big" middle of the play is entirely dominated by the theme of gambling. Highway hits a dramatic big jackpot. But unlike the sisters through persistent hard work. the dramatically active, full of life, middle of the play stand in sharp contrast with the lifeless, undramatic beginning and end.

To use computer technical terms, Highway uses the technique of cut and paste neighboring the beginning and end scene to the big middle of the play. In the opening and closing short scene the sisters wonder about how to rescue themselves from miserable life at the rez. They are obviously scared about their future lives in the past and the present; they have had no plans. Now they are stuck. In doing this Highway cuts this slice of the native Canadian life. Hence the rez sisters represent an old-new socio-political problem in Canada and the United States, Highway does the same thing with the "bingo" middle. This part, which is most of the play, is a blunt real presentation of the life on many Natives Canadians. Put together the two slices from real life stand in sharp contrast dramatically creating more than a binary opposition. Since the play presents the sisters as adults who are all above thirty years of age, the action therefore is already complicated. Readers and viewers find themselves overwhelmed with all kinds of details, not of one or two characters but surely with seven sisters.

Even the opening and ending short scenes are only rigid when compared to the hilarious bingo-like busy middle. We breathlessly run after the “crazy” sisters trying to comprehend their very speedy rhythm. Highway successfully transforms the real into an art of social living. A brilliant example of is the highly rhythmic highly dramatic scene of “fundraising activities” (70-76). the song consists of one “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” (70). The cementation also describes the activities of the sisters and Nanabush “as if we are looking at an insane eight-ring circus.” (70).

This scene takes us into a dream-like world where the sisters are so busy, so productive raising funds for the bingo game. We are never told where they get the money, to buy the grocery. They end a meeting with no agreement on anything but their insistence to go to the bingo. Highway always makes sure to deprive the sisters of any chance to benefit from the pseudo efforts they try to improve their leave. He also does the same with the audience. We do not have any chance to live under the illusion of the sisters getting any reward or making any progress based upon the pseudo attempts to get loans or raise funds. That is why Highway takes the further step of meta-fiction in presenting the loan scene and the fund raising scene. Doing this, Highway change the whole, big, middle of the play excessively unreal it is not only that the sisters get literally nothing from the bingo “business” but also its dramatic processes is anything but actual or real. Therefore the only parts that remain dramatically real are the dreams of the sisters in the short opening and closing scenes. Such successful dramatic technique agrees with what Derrida expects a do constructor to do: to circularly reverse the metaphysical hierarchies. A major traditional metaphysical to Derrida’s western metaphysical has always given privilege to being over non-being. The “being” part of the western (Canadian) dream (following the *Death of a Salesman*’s model) is a four-part hierarchy: hard work, less talk, morality, and success. The “non-being” part is of course the opposite of these four elements. Reality for Loman and his sons along with the rez sisters is no more than doing –nothing to improve their lives. Miller and Highway reverse the metaphysical hierarchy being /non- being giving privilege to non-being to dominate their place. The “being” in the two plays in never worked on or developed. Doing-nothing is the only dominate reality in the two plays. Loman’s lifetime strategy, which he extends to both Biff and Happy is to pretend to do things pretension, becomes what’s real and actual. Likewise the Rez sisters seem to be very active and energetic. They seem to be full of life. Ultimately their seemingly great effort to improve themselves and their lives turn out literally of nothing. In other words, the beginning and end of *The Rez Sisters* are exactly the same. Most of the play turns out to be empty rhetoric, non-being. Judged by the “American dream” formula both white (non-native) characters (Loman and his sons) as well as non-white (native) characters (the seven sisters) live a life of non-being. Both groups detach themselves of being. Unlike the binary opposition in *Death of a Salesman*, where Loman and his sons are in sharp contrast with the successful Ben and Charley, the seven sisters in *The Rez Sisters* are mostly compared to themselves.

Though short and quick, the beginning and ending scene (the being part) circles the big non-being middle. Formally and the thematically the beginning, the real repeats itself, in exact terms in the closing scenes. The sisters are back to where they exactly started. The hilarious, hyper active, and the multi-detailed long middle culminates into a zero value, non-being, nothing. The beginning and ending are identical like the two wings of Nanabush. the first time it appears in the play, Nanabush “just sits there”(19), “he won’t fly away”, watching Maria-Adele. when he invites her to “come”, Marie-Adele replies, “I have no wings, yet.” The second appearance of Nanabush, still in his guise as the seagull (47) happens outside the store, after the sisters’ vicious riot against each other. The bird does nothing like the first time. He sits and this time listens to Zhaboonigan telling her agony of brutal rape at the hands of two white boys (47). the only move Nanabush can do is to go “through agonizing contortions (48). Nanabush watches again and does nothing when the “seven women have this [their] grand and ridiculous march to the band office.” In their vain attempt to defeat the “invisible” chief and get the loan. The best Nanabush can do is to shrug a “don’t ask me, I don’t know” (60). When the girls are quite ready to leave the bingo, Nanabush suddenly appears to attack Maria-Adele and Zhaboonigan. The last appearance of Nanabush shows him very much united with the bingo master. He/She is the nighthawk and the bingo master at the same time. Cancer, Nanabush, and the bingo master are at one to kill Maria-Adele. Like the rez sisters, Nanabush never flies. Never takes off. Neutral, Nanabush could be anything. It all always depends on how the girls perceive themselves. A spirit of their ancestors own for Maria-Adele and Zhaboonigan, do not recognize Nanabush. Even for the two sisters who “can see the spirit inside the bird” (18), Nanabush remains nothing but part of the hallucinations. White or black, a seagull or a spirit, a nighthawk or a bingo master, Nanabush adds nothing to the present or future.

Pelajia who starts the action, hammering the roof, dreaming of paved roads that can “magically” solve the problems on the reservation, ends the play with the exact same wondering: “What choice do we have? The viscous circle will continue revolving forever if the girls insist on “bingoing” their lives. The only right “bingo” for the Rez sisters to do is hard work. *The Rez Sisters* is an artistic “reservation”. The play does not discuss a conflict between native Canadians and “white” colonizers. The conflict, any conflict, in the play is within the sisters themselves, within the reservation itself. The sisters decide to play “bingo” with their lives. Like Nanabush the white Canadians are metafictional “spirit” hovering over the sisters. The sisters never move an inch forward in seriously planning their lives. They always gamble everything. Highway presents what is there, giving no solutions. He insists that the crisis resides within the sisters. Nanabush could mean something “white” if they decide to. It is always a potential neutral unidentified power waiting for definition. Upon perception it could be a bird, white or black, symbolizing life or death. It could be deadly spiritualized or lively materialized. Many critics overburden the play through contextualization. For example, Anne Nothof sees *The Rez Sisters*, and *Dry Lips*, as Highway juxtaposition of “the cultural and spiritual values of Native and non-Native Canadians.” Nothof contextualize the few “bad” personal experience of some of the sisters with white guys into a social-political issue. Many women in the world have undergone similar, or, even worse, experiences of Emily Dictionary or Veronique. If any suggestions or solutions were in Highway’s mind when he wrote *The Rez Sisters*, they must have had to do with looking into the past not to complain or blame but to improve the present and the future, simply because it is always a waste of time to blame others.

Similar to the rez sisters Highway is angry and nervous in the play, but for different reasons. And as readers we share him the disappointment when we see the dead end the sisters reach. What makes us really angry and nervous is that the sisters never learn anything from their failures. Pelajia “returns once more to her hammering on the roof” but obviously not to fix it. Ever sister is only passing the time in preparation to go to the “bingo in Espanola next week” (115). Highway makes the scenes before and after the bingo so dull, empty, and meaningless. Dramatically, the opening and closing scenes are intentionally poor. Upon reflection we find out that the seemingly active long middle is the empty and meaningless part. We enjoy watching the “crazy” sisters with their down-to-earth language and activities, but we can see the remarkable dramatic design of Highway’s play.

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