

# Self –Representation and Empowerment in Tomson Highway’s The Rez Sisters

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## Abstract

The United States is a multi-ethnic culture. In any case, it overwhelms by the strategy of white man's predominance. Assimilation is typically the decision to keep away from segregation. Self-representation turns into a condition for other ethnic societies, that do not have European roots. This study discusses various forms of empowerment and self-representation in *The Rez Sisters* (1986) by the contemporary indigenous Canadian playwright, Tomson Highway. This playwright tries to prove too much power and comedy of his characters, which they consider during a continuous combination of infatuation and fighting. The ladies in Tomson's *The Rez Sisters* accomplish a specific level of strengthening as they get ready to accomplish their goals: the biggest bingo game in the world. They energetically alive and enrich with gigantic power. Nothing is exclusive for them; they have a deep understanding of one another, including their medical issues, family backgrounds, everyday schedules and even sex propensities. They affront and mock each other perseveringly yet consistently care regardless. These sisters are powerful and when they conflict, sparkles fled. Whenever they request furtherance, all are there for one another. They are energetic with humor as a power to make their lives simpler and to help them through dim times. The *Rez Sisters*' self-representation rely upon the hopefulness and their positive perspective. Suffering and poverty, however discourage never obliterate them, rather they harden them.

**Keywords:** Self –Representation, Empowerment, Resistance and Struggle, Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters*.

## Introduction

Tomson Highway is an Indigenous Canadian dramatist, novelist, and children's author. He was born on December 6, 1951. Before he was sent to a residential school, he was raised according to Cree traditions and his first language was Cree (Boyd, 2017). Six-year-old Tomson was removed from his family and brought to Guy Hill Indian Residential School. Before his fifteenth birthday, he was only granted summertime visits (Ostroff, 2018).

Abuse and terrible experiences were reported by children who had to attend residential schools and had to give up their language and culture as a consequence. At the

school, Highway says he spent “Nine of my best years of my life” and that it taught him English and how to play the piano. He states:

Those schools produced a large number of today's very successful and contented individuals, including myself, who are grateful to having attended them. Because of that education, I've been able to build a successful worldwide profession (Highway,2010).

In 1975, he received a Bachelor of Arts in Music with honors from the University of Western Ontario, and in 1976, he received a Bachelor of Arts in English (Highway, 2010). The dramatist James Reaney first caught his attention when he was studying for his degree

(Ostroff, 2018). Seven years were spent by Highway as a social worker on First Nations reservations in Canada. He also assisted in the creation and management of a number of indigenous music and art events (Highway, 2015).

As a result of these experiences, His works, which include books and plays, have brought him recognition from all around the globe. In 1986, Highway released "The Rez Sisters," a play that went on to win a number of accolades and was performed throughout the whole of Canada. In 1988, it was also shown at the Edinburgh International Festival. In 2010, Highway printed a Cree-language version of *The Rez Sisters*. That, Highway said, "In actuality, the Cree versions [...] are the original ones. The originals that were published 20 years ago were really translations" (Highway, 2012).

*The Rez Sisters* is a two act play set in the imaginary Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Wasychigand Hill Indian Reserve. The unique and varied characterization of Tomson Highway intellectually presents seven females and a trickster figure, Nanabush. These females are connected to one another either by marriage or by birth. Philomena Moosetail, Pelajia Patchnose, Annie Cook, Veronique St. Pierre Zhaboonigan Peterson, and Emily Dictionary determine to collect their posses and move to Toronto, to attempt their chance at the BIGGEST BINGO GAME IN THE WORLD<sup>1</sup> (Chandran, 2017). Highway starts out his work by describing in detail how miserable life is for the ladies who live in the Reserve. As he explains in the production notes he wrote for the play, the word "window" translates to "Wasychigan" in the Ojibway language, which is the name of the Native American Reserve. The reserve serves as a metonym for Native communities all throughout the nation that keep an eye on the obvious signals of an economically dominant white culture while also keeping an eye on their own symptoms of self-destruction and self-preservation (Schmalz, 1991).

Renate Usmiani notes that Highway's decision of an all-female cast is notable, "underlines the oppression of the respective societies and their desire for agency" (Usmiani, 1995). A world in which suffering is a daily occurrence but is by no means the most

significant one and in which sisterhood is a force to be reckoned with is shown with realism and comedy in *The Rez Sisters*. This universe is presented in a manner that is grounded in reality. Through an introspective exploration of indigenous atrocities and hegemony in a colonial history, this drama aims to reach pre-contact mythology. Rather, there was a basic Native domesticity that worked on a sisterhood consciousness in this core. There was no gendered hierarchy or hierarchical order among native women in this core. This was the heart of the Native American domesticity. The same mythopoeic feature can be observed in the play's historical present in the transitional awakening of *The Rez Sisters'* primal sisterhood consciousness, which provides as the basis for Highway's vision of the revival of the indigenous people (Highway, 1988).

The playwright's depiction of the seven Rez sisters is to uncover the agency, pride of character and human predominance of Native Women (Highway, 1988). He searches to reflect the power of women and humor which they show during a consistent combination of quibbling and fondness. Females in this play accomplish a specific level of strengthening as they get ready to accomplish their goal, winning THE BIGGEST MODERN BINGO IN THE WORLD (27). However, the playwright depicts the social real elements of his characters' lives without avoiding any details (MacKenzie, 2010).

## Analysis and Discussion

The self is an integrated unity of body, thought, feelings, ambitions, plans, ideas, values, actions, and qualities. Thus, self-representation is the experience of all these integrations (Almaas, 2006). M. B. Brewer and W. Gardner notice three principal self-representations of the self-concept: the singular self, the social self, and the aggregate self. Accordingly, one seeks self-representation in the forms of her/his unique traits and in group membership (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

In addition, self-representation is a course of three levels; the first is the visual experience that represents the rest of the world. The subsequent one is the familiarity with the experience. The third one is the representation

of the involvement with kinds of decisions in regards to identity (Levine, 2006). Self-representation is a process of the narrative and the cultural dimensions. It is a reflection of social experiences. The cultural dimension depends on the various ways of perceiving oneself in different cultures. The cultural dimension is divided into the individualist way and the collectivist way (Schlicht et al., 2009). According to the individualist way, the individual distinguishes herself/himself away from others by stressing personal characteristics, skills, traits, and values. The collectivist way emphasizes the connection of the individual with other people. Cultural variations, and social and personal factors are the elements that form the process of self-representation (Schlicht et al., 2009).

Pelagia Patchnose's house is the first stop for The Rez Sisters. Because she is the oldest, she is acutely aware of the spiritual and social issues facing the Rez and explores the potential of a revolution that would remove the church and state's white male authority figures. It's a bird's-eye view from her crow's nest, "away up here," as she fixes the roof with her silver hammer and hammers on the new shingles.

Despite the fact that I'm sitting on the top of this ancient home, I sort of enjoy being up here. On a clear day, I can see half of Manitoulin Island from here. I can see the chimneys, the tops of the apple trees, and the rubbish pile behind Big Joey's shabby home. I can see seagulls hovering above the white picket fence of Marie-Adele. Vessels in the North Channel... I want to be sailing someplace. The mill at Espianola is one hundred miles distant, and that's with some effort. See? If I had binoculars, I could see the Sudbury super stack. Moreover, if I were superwoman, I would be able to see the CN Tower in Toronto. All, but I'm only old Pelajia Rosella Patchnose and I'm here in dull, dusty, and uninteresting Wasychigan Hill. Wasy... waited... waited... nailed gleaming with my trusted silver hammer to the roof of Pelajia Rosella Patchnose's two-bedroom walfare dwelling... (2)

Pelajia's unhappiness with the deplorable state of things on the Reserve is glaringly apparent when she exclaims, "Everyone here is insane. No jobs. Nothing to

do except drink, foul odors each other's wives and spouses, and forget about Nanabush. In addition, "ancient tales" and "ancient language" are almost extinct (6). Pelajia centers around certain marks of endurance and agency, no matter what its starting points and she menaces and moves the other six Rez sisters, every one of whom battle with ways of making due in a divided society. This marker comes as the greatest bingo game on the planet which actuates the sisters for quite some time loved dreams (Chandran, 2017).

Philomena, the second sister, masks her feelings of melancholy by acting as if she is overjoyed. She had an affair with a married white guy when she was working as a secretary in the garment area of Toronto thirty years ago, and they eventually had a child together. Philomena had no choice except to give up her child for adoption, and she does not even know if she gave birth to a boy or a girl. She lives with a maternal longing for the child every day (Vahia, 2015).

Marie-Adele, the third sister, has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer and is worried about her husband and children's future. She is plagued by a constant fear of dying and is desperate to find a method to escape it (Chandran, 2017). It ought to be remembered that an undeniable aftereffect ovarian malignant growth is barrenness. Marie-Adele speaks about her partner, Eugene Starblanket: "I can't even have him [Eugene] inside me anymore. It's still growing in there, The cancer" (96). In real life, Marie-Adele is a hyper-fertile matriarch, having given birth to fourteen children. Kim Anderson makes sense of that "[m]otherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies" (162). Up to Kim, "[c]reation is understood to be within the realm of the female because of the profound understanding that women bring forth life" (Anderson, 2000, p.168).

The story of Emily Dictionary is also tragic. Emily is an unappealing character: a coarse young lady who has recently come to the reservation from California. However, during their journey, she reveals her dark past and we learn that her present hard-bitten persona maybe just one stage in a long process of healing. Her previous husband beat her violently for ten years before she left him. In

San Francisco, she joined a posse of native lesbians “bike chicks” and had a relationship with one of them. Her lover unfortunately had been driven to self-destruction and suicide by going headlong into a large eight-wheeler truck. Thus, with the splash of her sweetheart's blood on her neck, Emily drives on “straight on to daylight”, back to her home on the reserve, bent on avoiding any self-destruction at all costs (Highway, 1988).

Annie Cook, the eternal optimist, has a single-track mind, “when I go to THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, I will win. For sure I will win ... then I will take all my money and ... buy every single one of Patsy Cline’s records” (35). She is the one who had brought the news of the bingo and whose dream is partly realized, as she joins her intended music group at the end of the play (Vahia, 2015).

Veronique appears to be a narrow-minded gossipmonger, frustrated by her own childlessness. Veronique small mindedness is a symptom not of having two little love to give, but rather of having two few people on whom she can bestow it (Johnson, 1990).

Finally, there is Zhaboonigan Patterson, adopted daughter with mental impairment, Veronique A group of white adolescents raped her. Highway depicts her reliving the rape in the play at a time when the other women are in a state of anarchic strife, prior to their decision to work together to collect the required funds for the journey to Toronto. Thus, the stage comedy is interrupted by a detailed description of the rape, which is an indisputable indication of the brutality perpetrated against one local lady. This character's presentation is based on a true occurrence that occurred in a tiny Manitoban community. Helen Betty Osborne, a young indigenous girl, was gang-raped, attacked with a screwdriver, and left to die on the side of the road (Collins, 1993).

In an interview with the native critic Hartmut Lutz, Highway states that the natives have a folklore that is a great many years old, which was practically ruined, sometimes obliterated and affected by Christian religion. Be that as it may, when this occurs, he feels, unavoidably, the soul of this folklore endures considerably more office. ... It's approaching back, it's still a lot of alive in our spirits. There

is an otherworldliness that actually is so organization, strong, wonderful and enthusiastic. This enduring otherworldliness keeps the local area in Canada ticking and dynamic and occupied with living (Lutz, 1991).

Nanabush, the Ojibway Trickster figure disguised as a nighthawk, a seagull, and eventually as the Bingo Master, is the final character. Nanabush is essential to portraying the principles of Native American culture. This Trickster, called by many names in different languages, is a central character in all Native American mythology. In his play's note on Nanabush, Highway writes:

“Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, (Nanabush) teaches us about the nature and meaning of existence on the planet earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit. Some say that Nanabush left this continent when the whiteman came. We believe he is still here among us. ... without him – and without the spiritual health of this figure – the core of Indian culture would be gone forever” (Highway, 1988).

For the native audience, who is raised on the stories of the trickster, Nanabush is easily accepted as a seagull, a seducer, a fast-talking bingo master. According to Highway, the trickster is as vital to Cree culture as Christ is to western culture. Typifying characteristics of values and native language, Nanabush is amusing, instinctive and maybe of either gender. While explaining the divergence of Christian tradition and Nanabush, Highway takes help of a circle and explains that a native looks at life as a continuous cycle. From what Helen Gilbert says:

One of Nanabush's jobs is to "absorb and change the pain caused by the cruelties that came with the colonization of Native land and cultures." (391).

There is also “Bingo Betty,” a well-known former women's bingo player who has become an iconic figure (5). Bingo Betty is both a sign of social change, achieved by colonialism, and the sisters' guide. Pioneer endeavors to supplant Native Spirituality with Christianity have motivated the sisters to rethink their gods. The sentimental invocation of Betty suggests that Pelajia is fully aware of the dreadful position that her community is in

and is attempting to construct an image of hopefulness out of the catastrophe that surrounds her (MacKenzie, 2010).

The way Philomena is portrayed in the end shows how well-known Bingo Betty has become in the sisters' minds:

For as well as, Bingo Betty would attend every single game of bingo, sitting like a monarch smack dab in the center of the room, massive and large like a roast beef. Two young city cousins came one night; they were dressed very well, as if they were going to church on Sunday; and Bingo Betty had them seat one on each side of her with their three tiny bingo cards. With 27 cards, Bingo Betty seated in the center of the table. There are 27 cards in this deck! Amazing. (16-17)

Betty and her two cousins address an advanced form of the Holy Trinity. These three bingo players represent a stunning reimagining of classic Christian image. Betty's existence proposes that the sisters make another otherworldliness, rather than essentially taking on the one forced upon them (MacKenzie, 2010).

At the opening of the play, all the female characters are separated and miserable. All the characters' squabbling and accusations are revealed as a full-scale riot breaks out, revealing the signs of the community's downfall. With all of their violent outbursts, the Rez women seem helpless. The women's allegations reveal their genuine feelings for one another. When Marie-Adele starts to lose her strength and fall during the battle, the relationship between the sisters becomes evident. All of the fighting stops, and the sisters start to worry about Marie-Adele. This is the first step toward getting back together as sisters. They also work together to tell Emily to "use her brain" and stop having affairs with Big Joey because she has a black eye. The sisters' community takes another big step forward when they start talking about **THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD**. Annie Cook leads all the women on a march to the post office to find out if the rumors are true, and then they plan a trip to Toronto (Chandran, 2017).

Pelajia suggests that, since the sisters don't have enough money to get to Toronto, they should go to the band office and ask the chief for a loan to pay for their trip. The money

they win could be used to pave the roads and solve all of the band's problems. The "Grand and Ridiculous March to the Band Office" is the first time the women all worked together and took charge of their lives. Since the chief won't give them any money, the women get together in Pelajia's basement to figure out what to do. They decide to take Big Joey's van and stay with Philomena's son in a single room. Emily and Annie will drive the whole way. The second way they are working together and taking charge of their own lives to reach their goal is by trying to raise money. Nanabush watches over the women as they try to raise money, adding to their rush to succeed. In ten days, the women raise \$1493.65 by doing what they can and helping each other. Pelajia helps her man fix things, Philomena watches kids, Annie and Emile sing, Marie Adele does laundry, Veronique bakes, and Zhaboonigan picks blueberries. Once the women reach their goal, they start their journey (Somacarrera, 2014).

Enormous Joey's van turns into the private voyaging local area as the women find passionate closeness in their physical closeness in the van. They share their genuine feelings and fears to one another. As a mother, Marie-Adele worries about what will happen to her children after she dies and what will happen to her family. The ladies have gained their independence by the time they arrive in Toronto. They are assuming responsibility for one another and for their own well-being. Their efforts to attain their tangible goals transform into the spiritual necessities that they addressed. As Veronique moves into the house of the deceased Marie-Adele, caring for and cooking for her fourteen children and husband, her goal of owning a state-of-the-art oven and publishing a cookbook of the highest caliber becomes an incredible reality. Although only Philomena really earned money and fulfilled her financial goal, each of the other ladies departed emotionally richer for having discovered the energy to succeed. The result is a community that is strengthened by variety and prepared to face the future together (Chandran, 2017).

In the second scene, the sisters find out that Toronto will host **THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD**. All of the women hope that winning the jackpot will help them reach their

own goals. The women's goals come from the fact that their home area has been mistreated because of colonization. Pelajia's wish is the most selfless. He wants to "shut that old boss down" and build "jet black" and "shiny" streets for the Rez (8). Philomena desires a bathroom with a brand-new, "large and extremely white" toilet (5). Annie Cook, who is fascinated with "Fritz the Katz," a Jewish country singer, requires "the finest record player in the world" (35) to listen to Patsy Cline albums (35). Marie-Adele plans to spend her prize money on "a complete island" in the "North Channel" so that her family would have a place to call home that is enough for their needs (36). Veronique, who yearns for a larger family and is fixated on practicing orthodox Christianity, is determined to get the largest stove on the Rez so that she may "embrace Marie-Adele Starblanket's kids and cook for them" (36). According to Ann Nothof, these "goals are essentially unconscious psychological survival strategies that provide a means of meeting physical requirements and ameliorating existing living situations" (MacKenzie, 2010).

The goals of the ladies are limited to alleviating the immediate suffering, and they are unable to solve the more systemic problems that have been produced by colonization and forced assimilation. It's never an inquiry when one of the ladies talks like she's going to win the bingo. Without a conviction that their desires will be understood, the agony of social and otherworldly dispossession will become agonizing. It is important to note that this self-representation and powerful individual is a woman. (Stuart, 1997).

At THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, when the play gets to its climax, the women show up as messengers at "the last supper" (102). Leonardo da Vinci's wall painting from the 1500s shows the last supper from Jesus's last days, as told in the Gospel of John (Ladwein, 2006). During their last dinner together, Jesus informs his disciples that one of them would betray him; the painting shows the many reactions of the disciples. In this moment, Marie-Adele leaves behind a life beyond death with Nanabush, who lives a double life as the smart Bingo Master, and the ladies effectively lose her. Highway's use of Christian mythology does not indicate that other women are followers, despite the fact that Marie-Adele

may be seen as a representation of Christ. The play's denouement reveals a mixture of Christian and indigenous practices. The mixture brings forth the agency of women, particularly Philomena, who temporarily exemplifies Bingo Betty's spirit. Highway depicts Philomena asking the Bingo Master to reveal her fortunate number while holding 27 playing cards. For this brief sequence, Philomena is represented by Bingo Betty. When B14 is not called, the sisters attack the platform and seize the number machine out of spite. The theft of the equipment signifies that the female characters will never again put their wants' autonomy at danger (MacKenzie, 2010).

Every one of the sisters are affected thoroughly by Marie-Adele's passing. The fantasticality that swarms the play's activity finishes in apparently "magical transformations" (Highway, 354). The changes also show that Marie-Adele is a Christ-like figure. To this point in the story, Veronique has proved herself to be a gossipy character who is resentful of her own lack of children and a miserable marriage. Veronique will be able to fulfill her ambition after Marie-Adele has passed away and her children are in need of her care. Eugene Starblanket gives everything that Veronique's alcoholic spouse cannot: an enormous meal to prepare, a decent oven to cook it in, and a family that needs her affection and care. Veronique's personality is in this manner improved and she turns into a blissful non-permanent mother. Annie Cook is fulfilled by the valuable chance to sing in the band with Fritz the Katz, in spite of the fact that she is compelled to settle with an acquired stereo. Philomena, who wins six hundred dollars, is the sole winner at "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD". Because of this best of luck, she is at long last ready to introduce her extravagant, current washroom, the feature of which is an "elevated" toilet (117). The excursion to Toronto and its completion with Marie-Adele's passing have likewise brought about Pelajia turning into a more agent leader. She no longer needs to leave the Wasy Rez, however would prefer to remain and override the old Chief. To this degree, Highway conjectures a confident future for the rez sisters. It is fitting that a play permeated with such fantastical surrealism shut in this mysteriously hopeful way.

The most significant difference is Emily Dictionary's self-representation. Because of Zhaboonigan's tenderness, Emily relinquishes her hardened demeanor and shows a supportive side to the mentally weakened adoptive daughter of Veronique St. Pierre. In the climactic scene of the play, Emily reveals to everyone that she is expecting a child. Emily is reborn as a loving sister to Zhaboonigan and a loving mother to her unborn child, which serves as a consolation for Zhaboonigan and his family after the loss of Marie.

Since Marie-Adele is likewise a Christ-like figure, Highway might be endeavoring to debate Christian thoughts of a male god (Highway, 2009). In this way, her death might be seen as a symbol of colonial disruption of matricentric Native practices. As seen by Julia Emberley, "Indigenous mothers suffered the real effects of colonial policies. Their sexuality and bodies were subject to regulations for the purposes of establishing . . . patriarchal governance" (Emberley, 2007, p.169). Emily's pregnancy gives a reciprocal image to Marie-Adele's death (Highway, 1998). Spiritual regeneration and colonial removal of Native culture are two distinct concepts. In the play, fecundity has good implications. Marie-Adele is a supernatural female authority whose death effectively betters the existences of her sisters. Emily's pregnancy is a happy event for the Wasy Rez, as it means a new start for the family. It is this spirit that keeps their hope alive and shapes their agency optimistic nature. It is noteworthy that whenever any of this woman mentions winning the bingo, she says, "when I win" and not "if I win". Thus, each character comes to term with her sorrows. In spite of expressing a wish to leave the reserve at the first possible opportunity, they are unshakably and resolutely bound to Wasaychigan and do not wish to leave it. And the play concludes with Emily voicing a feeling essentially common to all:

If I don't go to paradise when I die, Lord, at least let me go to Wasy, since that's the closest place I've gone since I died. (87)

In conclusion, one may conclude that Tomson Highway's remarkable figures, who display both weaknesses and beauty, also convey a broad sense of human decency. The achievement of *The Rez Sisters* is that it centers around an assortment of such

undervalued lives and brings them up to size. Against the setting of social wickedness because of liquor abuse, illicit drug use, physical and psychological mistreatment and viciousness, mental and social relocation and seclusion, the seven women in the play are survivors, who with humor and industrious hopefulness imagine a superior world and the flourishing of their community. The play is known for its comedic parts and open lyricism, which helps people let go of their feelings. Its main purpose is to make the native characters feel closer to each other. So, *The Rez Sisters* is definitely a mix of native and foreign cultures that come together beautifully to give a scent of Reserve life.

## Conclusion

The playwright also demonstrates the strength and agency of women. The seven women are living independent, they earn their living, they take care of their children, and fight for their rights. For instance, all the seven sisters go to Toronto to win the Bingo on their own and they drive the car by themselves and arrange everything and earn money. Each of the women has her own unique perspective on life on the reservation, on males, on people who are not of indigenous descent, on city life, on Toronto, and on what she plans to do with the money she wins at bingo. Emily is a good example of agency as she left her husband who abused her and is living on her own. Marie Adele, mother of 14 children, is living on her own and she is also taking care of her children. Pelajia also worries about social problems as she wants paved roads for all: "I know how to handle that tired old chief. He and I have been arguing, about paved roads for years now, I'll tell him we'll build paved roads all over the reserve with our prize money" (8). The narrator also wants to direct our attention towards the shallow thinking of people about women. Some people think that women cannot be at higher positions as Philomena thinks that Pelajia cannot be chief because she is a woman. "Oh, go on. You'll be never chief" (114) "Because you're a woman" (114). All the dialogues used in this play support female agency. The women make their own decisions and act upon them.

Notes:

1 THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD is reliably written in capital letters all through the play to stress the energy with which the females talk about the occasion.

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