



# “Our Home and/ on Native Land”- A Perpetual Condemnation and Combat of the Aboriginals— A Case Study of George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*

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**Abstract**— Through a critical reading of George Ryga's landmark play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), this essay examines the ongoing marginalization and resistance of Canada's Indigenous peoples. With its roots in Ryga's personal experience as a cultural outsider and its inspiration from a real-life case of an Aboriginal woman who was murdered, the play effectively exposes the systemic racism, gendered violence, and cultural erasure that Aboriginal communities face. The article frames the ongoing discussion about Indigenous rights with the symbolic act of resistance performed by singer Jully Black, who changed the Canadian national anthem to highlight settler colonialism. The play illustrates how dominant colonial structures like the legal system, the Church, and others criminalize, silence, and obliterate Indigenous identity through Rita Joe's tragic story. The study looks at how memory sequences give voice to subaltern experiences while characters like Father Andrew and the Magistrate enforce assimilation. The study makes the case that Rita and Jaimie both embody marginalized voices fighting against imposed identities and systemic violence, drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern.



**Keywords**— Indigenous marginalization, systemic racism, postcolonial theory, cultural erasure, subaltern resistance

## I. INTRODUCTION

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 2023, when the fans of the Bucks and Lakers were still replaying the memories of the two days filled with powerful playing in their heads, Jully Black played a very subtle grammatical game. The Canadian R&B singer made a very small but drastic change in the Canadian national anthem ‘O Canada’. The original lyrics of the anthem goes like ‘Our home and native land’, which was changed to ‘Our home on native land’ signifying the importance of the Canadian Indigenous people.

People thus, till date, are voicing out their views regarding the rights and the ‘right place’ of the Native people in history, the current time and the future. Not just the people belonging to the Indigenous tribes of Canada, but even the

non-Natives have voiced their support for a long time. One such figure is writer George Ryga.

George Ryga was born in Alberta to Ukrainian immigrant parents, who came to Canada just five years before his birth. It was his minority background that provided him with enough sympathy for the Natives. Ryga thus came up with his most pioneering work titled *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* in 1967. The story deals with the Aboriginal girl named Rita Joe who is charged with various accusations like vagrancy, theft, and prostitution. At the surface level, one might be deluded into thinking that the Magistrate is supportive and unprejudiced, but in truth he is like any other White who sees the Indigenous in a poor light. But it is in his court that Rita narrates the story of her life. Rita is taken back and forth in memories of her loved ones which include her father David, her sister Eileen, and her friend-lover Jaimie Paul.

She gets reminded of the time when her mother's body was being flown through an aircraft. Mr. Homer pitches in and boasts of the help that the Whites, and in general the missionaries, provide the Aboriginals with. Rita comes out of her memories and is charged with prostitution. The court allows for the testimonies of the convicts and the victim, with an evident prejudiced nature. The four murderers cum rapists are brought for testimony. They appear in front of the magistrate, very conceited and snobbish in the claims about their act, without any iota of repentance and shame. Going by the claims of the murderers, Rita is sentenced to thirty days in jail.

The Act 2 of the play starts with Father Andrew, the priest visiting Rita in her cell. He has been a father-figure to Rita, all her life. But here we see his frantic efforts in the direction of Rita's confessions to the crimes she has not committed. He brings in Christian ideals and conducts to advise her to confess and come into Christianity's fold. Rita then again goes back into her memories, where she sees her father, David in a dilemma over choosing a new chief for his tribe. One more incident that surfaces in her memories is that of the feud between Jaimie and Mr. Homer. The feud which started as Mr. Homer's boasting and Jamie's mistrust towards people like him, takes a violent turn and Mr. Homer advances towards Jaimie with a knife in his hand.

Finally, the readers get to know about the gruesome murder and rape of Rita by the four convicts. Jaimie, who tried helping his lover, is also murdered in the process. The play ends with the funeral procession of the two, with Father Andrew still chanting the Christian hymns.

## II. VICTIMIZATION AND SUBJUGATION OF THE SUBALTERNS

The play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is set in colonized Canada and highlights the sufferings of the Aboriginals. The Aboriginals of Canada refers to the people belonging to majorly three groups. These groups are First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. It is a dilemma that these Aboriginals have to get themselves registered as citizens (Status Indians and Non-Status Indians) in order to secure their own security. The various provisions like the Indian Act, pass systems, reserves etc. have snatched away the culture of these Aboriginals and have reduced them to live at the mercy of the Whites. The same is portrayed in the play by Ryga. The play brings to forefront the oppressions faced by the women belonging to these sections. especially the Aboriginal women. Such a woman, living among Whites is always in danger of one or the other sort. In the very beginning of the play, we see that Rita works in a tire company and one day when she gets late returning home, she is arrested by a police officer who then presents her as a prostitute in the

court. In reality, the only 'offense' that Rita commits is of leaving the Indian reserves allotted to the Aboriginals in pursuit of a better life and opportunities in the city. Such atrocities against women became very common in the colonized country where these women faced the 'double-burden,' of belonging to the 'color' and to the 'weaker sex.' The Whites always thought it as their duty to reform the 'savage ways' of the people they ruled. Characters like Father Andrew were present throughout history who, on the surface, gave a fatherly affection, with the main motive to convert these Aboriginals into their 'faith.' Unable to force Rita to plead guilty for her crimes he says the following words:

*"You' re not the woman I expected you to be... Your pride, Rita... your pride... may bar you from heaven!"* (Ryga 83)

The ulterior motives of the Whites i.e., colonization through religious subjugation becomes very clear through works like this.

*"Long ago the white men came with Bibles, to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years.... then we had all the Bibles, an' the white man had our land..."* (Ryga 84)

The Whites always saw the Aboriginals as a 'troublesome' lot. They were often seen as savage and exotic, with awe and fear at the same time. In the play we see Whites' perception of Jaimie as a drunkard which in turn makes it very hard for him to get a job. The treatment by Whites forced this man to go through what we can call a 'changing shift in identity.' He is the one character who is troubled by this 'politics of identity.' The Whites in the play never call out his name in the correct way, highlighting the way they ill-treat the marginalized. Something as universal as a name is also taken away from them and instead they are called by derogatory terms like 'you boy', 'fella' etc.

*"Teach me who I really am! You've taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man."* (Ryga 111)

Even Rita tries her best to come to terms with the changing times and the life in the city but again and again she is brought back to the jail seeing in her a 'possible threat' for others. The father-figure Magistrate, too, reprimands time and again. He believes that she "will be back...always be back...growing older, filthier...looking more like stone and prison bars" (Ryga 117).

Bringing in an autobiographical touch to the story, we can find that Ryga too in his real life faced a 'double-burden' of its own kind. Since he had Ukrainian lineage, he was very well seen as a part of the colonizers. But his status of second-citizen, owing to immigration, placed him in the cadre of the colonized. The tough life, which Ryga underwent is thus explored through Rita.

Thus, the most important lens through which one can analyze the play is through the 'voice and representations of the subalterns.' Gayatri Spivak's pioneering work "Can the Subaltern Speak" also focusses on the urge of subjugation by the colonizers. Rita and Jaimie both act the subaltern voices in the play, as opposed to Rita's father David who resists any form of fight against the colonial masters. Memory-mode is used by Ryga, to highlight the voice of the subalterns, who are forced out of their own homes, where the White settlers have occupied their position. Their voices are always snubbed and they meet their tragic end towards the finale. They are reduced to mere 'twisted, broken body' (Ryga 124). Spivak and Ryga bring to light the same point that subalterns or the marginalized can never stand up for their own cause. They are forever tormented by the external forces of 'power' and 'knowledge' which is presumably higher than theirs.

Lastly, the title of the play is itself very significant. Ecstasy is generally defined as the state of trance associated with seers and saints. This ecstasy is the result of a long battle with suffering which culminates in eternal peace or feeling of joy. The final scene in the play equates the protagonist Rita with a saint. Her gruesome murder is likened to a pious sacrifice that she made in the name of her identity, her people, and her country. This is the most important point that Ryga wanted to bring home, thus giving the title, too, its much-deserved significance.

The play holds the highest esteem among all the other works of Ryga, evident by the name of his biography by James Hoffman. Hoffman in 1995 came up with Ryga's biographical account by the name *The Ecstasy of Resistance*.

### III. CONCLUSION

The problem of colonization and its effect doesn't end with the political liberation of the country, alone. Evil is deep-rooted. Things haven't changed from the time the play was published till now. Incidents like these are not merely the creative genius of the writer but facts. The play itself is influenced by an article in the "Vancouver Newspaper" regarding the murder and dumping of an Aboriginal girl. The Vancouver reviewer later reflected in the 1976 issue that Ryga's play "punctured the euphoria and smug complacency of Canada's birthday celebrations and declared unequivocally that all was not well with this country and its institutions" (Krueger 5). Till date incidents like Jully Black's lyric swap of the National Anthem remind us that there is something wrong with the way we perceive things. The way we neglect the history of the Aborigines and seek ownership of the land which belongs to them.

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