



Cosmopolitanism And Its Discontent: The Plight Of Indigenous People In George Ryga's The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe

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Abstract: The Ecstasy of Rita Joe was released in 1970 and makes the argument about the contradictions within the concept of cosmopolitanism, by revealing the systemic oppression that Indigenous peoples face in Canada. Through the sad story of Rita Joe, a young Indigenous woman who comes from a reservation to the city looking for a better life, Ryga decries the failures of colonial institutions on legal, educational, and religious grounds to promote justice and equality. The play portrays the plight of Indigenous populations, displaced through colonial exploitation, between the erosion of their traditional means of livelihood and the exclusion by the urban society. Recurrent arrest, economic marginalization, and finally the violent killing of Rita show just how widespread racism and structural impediments are in her reality. The magistrate's attitude of blaming the Indigenous culture for its problems is just one instance of dominant society's refusal to acknowledge systemic inequalities. Schools and churches claim to work for the integration and uplift of Indigenous peoples but unwittingly perpetuate their social disenfranchisement. Ryga's work stands as a more generalized indictment of colonialism, shattering the myth of altruistic cosmopolitanism and laying bare the ongoing violence against marginalized communities. In this sense, by focusing on Rita Joe, the drama forces its audience to confront whether the consequences of colonialism persist, and if so, how urgent the call for decolonial justice really is.

Index Terms - Cosmopolitanism; Colonialism; Indigenous marginalization; Systemic racism; Decolonial justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of cosmopolitanism generally gets idealized as being that philosophy of global unity and shared humanity, but it actually has a very colonial past in Europe (Appiah, 2006). Emerging in periods of worldwide exploration and exploitation, it was much of the time used as a tool under the guise of Western thought systems to impose Christianity, liberalism, and free-market capitalism upon the Indigenous civilizations (Harvey, 2009). Yet, in reality, under the banner of alleged universalism, the real outcome was always dispossession and marginalization of the indigenous peoples of the world. George Ryga's The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (1970) brings that stark contradiction out into the open, showing how cosmopolitanism has become a rallying cry against systemic oppression.

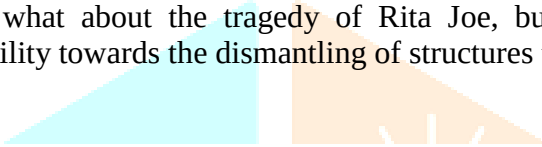
Rita Joe embodies the historical trauma all Indigenous people endure as they are forced to negotiate the world carved out by colonial violence. Her movement from the reservation into the city symbolizes the general displacement of the Indigenous peoples who have been cut from their lands, cultures, and traditional economies (Coulthard, 2014). When Rita finds survival hard in a city that is hostile to her identity, Ryga launches a critique at the hypocrisy of a society that professes to be inclusive but carries on the racial and economic exclusion.

European colonialism interfered with Indigenous societies and ways of life; those economies were self-sufficient, but they were replaced with exploitative systems that were hardly conducive to the ways Indigenous peoples retained themselves (Wolfe, 2006). It summarizes this waxing of the necessity of wage labor from a subsistence economy which then made the economic viability of a lot of Indigenous peoples questionable. Reservation, rather than being sanctuaries, became stagnating areas for the Indigenous peoples to go into the cities of the colonists and be put through a further veil of invisible marginalization (Alfred, 2005).

The critique goes far beyond the self-image of Canada as a benevolent nation. Whereas the magistrate insists that "the roads of the city are open to us...Nobody is a prisoner here" (Ryga, 1970, p. 29-30), with Rita's repeated arrests for vagrancy and prostitution, those claims are rendered empty. Instead of protecting her, the law penalizes poverty, what Wacquant (2009) terms as the "penalization of the poor."

The legacy of colonialism that continues to encumber and define modern-day Canada is put forth before beholders by *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. By placing the story of Rita centrestage, Ryga casts away the lofty notions of cosmopolitan benevolence; Indigenous persons find themselves caught between the erosion of their traditions and the inhospitable modern world. The play does not warrant mere face-value sympathy. Instead, it calls for structural change that echoes movements for Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial justice today (Coulthard, 2014).

As Canada and other settler-colonial nations come to terms with their histories, Ryga's work becomes ever more relevant in critiquing a social order that continues to fail Indigenous people. It does not ask the obvious, what about the tragedy of Rita Joe, but rather poses the question concerning the collective responsibility towards the dismantling of structures that keep the tragedy alive.



The Colonial Legacy and Indigenous Displacement

1.1. The Erosion of Traditional Livelihoods

Before European settlement, the Indigenous nations across Turtle Island used to maintain a complex economic principle based on hunting, fishing, and agriculture, the whole bearing a reciprocal association with the land (Coulthard, 2014). These systems were disrupted by what has been termed colonial capitalism that thrust us, private property regimes, and resource extraction, so much so that traditional modes of subsistence were rendered impossible (Wolfe, 2006). Rita's father in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* articulates this devastation thus:

"If we only fish an hunt an cut pulpwood... pick strawberries in the bush... for a hundred years more, we are dead." (Ryga, 1970, p. 56)

This statement is also a condemnation of the destruction of Indigenous economies—a process Glen Coulthard (2014) refers to as "primitive accumulation," whereby the nominal Indigenous presence on these domains is coerced into wage labor under harsh exploitative conditions. Instead of being places where Indigenous autonomy was subject, reservations became incubators of economic stagnation that sank Indigenous life deeper into wretchedness and into the cities where marginalization intensified—A case exemplified in Alfred (2005).

1.2. The Double Bind of Urban Migration

Rita's passage is reminiscent of the mid-20th century Indigenous experience of urbanization in Canada when policies such as the 1969 White Paper attempted to forcibly assimilate Indigenous peoples by severing their ties to reserves (Lawrence, 2004). To an Indigenous worker, however, the urban centres offered exclusion and not opportunity. Thus as Rita would come to find out, Indigenous migrants were denied housing, employment, plus dignity, wrapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and criminalization (Borrows, 2016).

The magistrate's declaration that "the roads of the city are open to us... Nobody is a prisoner here" (Ryga, 1970, pp. 29-30) sets a bitterly ironic tone with this backdrop—Rita having been arrested multiple times for vagrancy, a charge almost always manipulated against the Police against the poor (Wacquant, 2009). It is an

experience shackling, according to Sherene Razack (2015), called spatial segregation: Indigenous bodies have no place in the urban landscape and are policed and punished for their very presence.

2. Systemic Discrimination on the Urban Landscape

2.1. Criminalizing Poverty

Rita's arrests for vagrancy and prostitution show how the colonial legal systems labelled what are really indigenous survival strategies as criminal acts. Instead of treating with the root causes of poverty—land dispossession, lack of job opportunities—the justice system has blamed recalcitrant individuals for their circumstances. The magistrate's railing—

"The obstacles to your life are here... in your thoughts... possibly even in your cultures." (Ryga, 1970, p. 40)

—resonates with colonial discourses that categorized Indigenous people as "backward" and requiring correction (Said, 1978). Such ideology is the same that survives to this day in the policing systems where Indigenous women are incarcerated 12 times more than non-Indigenous women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2020).

2.2. Exclusion from the Labour Markets

Economic racism entrenches further marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Eileen, Rita's sister, is a good seamstress but cannot find work because "no white woman came to her" (Ryga, 1970, p. 32). Employment discrimination paints a similar picture: Indigenous people in Canada have unemployment rates that are twice the national average, with wage differentials existing even for university graduates (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010). The witness's dismissal of Rita—"I can't wait around... there's lots of white people lookin' for work"—illustrates how employers apply the weapon of racial stereotypes to justify exclusion (Henry & Tator, 2006).

3. The Failure of Colonial Institutions

3.1. Education as Assimilation

Canada's systems of residential schools were set upon the "kill the Indian in the child" (TRC, 2015), and although *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is set post-residential schools, the spirit of educational violence continues. The magistrate scolds Rita:

"We provide schools for you and you won't attend them... that little extra effort is too much for you." (Ryga, 1970)

This occurs in the shadow of schools that often fail to recognize Indigenous epistemologies (Battiste, 2013) and instead reproduce the colonial hierarchy.

3.2. Religious Hypocrisy

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe presents a Christian church, which saw itself as a source of moral authority and a civilizing influence during Canada's colonial past, as an accomplice in the oppression of Indigenous peoples. One of the most condemning indictments of missionary hypocrisy comes from Rita's uncle:

"The Indians were holding all the Bible and the Whiteman all their land." (Ryga, 1970)

To put this succinctly is to encapsulate what scholars have termed the spiritual conquest of Native peoples (Niezen, 2003, p. 47). Missionaries served as agents of colonialism, generally in advance of settlers, by converting Indigenous peoples to keep them pacified while their lands were slowly appropriated (Regan, 2010). The Bible was a tool for dispossession, with its promises of salvation covering up the harsh land theft that was taking place in reality. This historical pattern is still very much alive; in the words of Cree scholar

Willie Ermine (2007), the Christian doctrine was used to disrupt Indigenous linkages to the land so that capitalism could take over.

The priest character in RLG's drama stands as the living embodiment of many other social aberrations. His solicitation of a confession from Rita is met with her fiery retort:

"Go tell your God...when you see him...Tell him about Rita Joe and what they done to her! Tell him about your soul too...that you were not good enough for me, but that didn't stop you tryin'!" (Ryga, 1970, p. 80).

3.3. Justice as Sites of Violence

Forty-two percent of incarcerated women are Indigenous, according to the Office of the Correctional Investigator (2020).

The courtroom scenes in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* demonstrate how the Canadian justice system acts as a catalyst for colonial violence, disguised as impartiality. Rita's multiple arrest hearings for vagrancy and prostitution-from acts of survival amid economic deprivation-are phenomena that legal scholar Sherene Razack calls "racialized spatial management" (p. 63). The law does not exist to protect Indigenous women; it exists to police their movements and limit them within socially acceptable boundaries.

Rita's eventual rape and murder serve as symbols for what the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) would later describe as a "Canadian genocide" (p. 50). The play's tragic end foreshadows the present statistic that Indigenous women are:

- 12 times more likely to be murdered or disappeared than other Canadian women (MMIWG Report, 2019)
- Overrepresented in prison populations at 42% of incarcerated women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2020)
- Routinely dehumanized during police investigations (Human Rights Watch, 2013)

The magistrate's courtroom demeaning rhetoric becomes an example of what Cree legal scholar Hadley Friedland (2018) terms "colonial constitutionalism" - utilizing legal language to make disguised the process of Indigenous dispossession. When he blames Rita's culture for her predicament, he recycles timeworn colonial tropes that view Indigenous peoples as carrying some inherent deficiency rather than being fellow victims of systemic violence.

Rita's final rape and murder illustrate what later became identified as a "Canadian genocide" by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). The dreadful ending to the play looks ahead to current figures showing that Indigenous women are:

- 12 times more likely to be murdered or to disappear than other Canadian women (MMIWG Report, 2019)
- Overrepresented in prison populations at 42% of incarcerated women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2020)
- Dehumanized in police investigations on a regular basis (Human Rights Watch, 2013)

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Ryga's prescient critique reminds us that true justice involves dismantling those colonial systems and not merely implementing reforms on them. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson asserts in 2014, the law itself must be decolonized to prevent it from continuing to perpetrate violence against Indigenous bodies.

Conclusion: Toward Decolonial Futures

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe stands as a searing critique against Canada's colonial present. Rita's tale is not historical; it is an ongoing one, as Indigenous peoples continue to fight for land restitution, economic justice, and freedom from gendered violence. Ryga launches a challenge upon the non-Indigenous audience to look into their own complicity with these systems, and to support Indigenous-led movements from Land Back to #MMIWG. As the case of Rita demonstrates, there is no justice without going beyond empathy toward the structural dismantling of colonialism.

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