

The Plight of Native Indians in the Canadian Society as Revealed in Ryga's *Indian*

V.Ayothi

Former Professor & Head
Department of English Studies
Bharathidasan University
Tiruchirapalli
prof_ayothi@yahoo.com

George Ryga felt the need to speak for those who could not speak for themselves. This attitude projects him as a committed writer with a lot of social concern. The relationship between the native minority groups like Indians, Inuit and Metis and the white majority in Canada is worth studying in length. Ryga has depicted some vital aspects of this complex relationship in two of his plays: *Indian* and *Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Ryga's first-hand experience adds to the vitality and vigour of these two plays. In this paper a close study of *Indian* is taken up to demonstrate how the native Indians were subjected to exploitation and discrimination.

The protagonist of the play *Indian*, the nameless Indian is a universal symbol; the name of any oppressed man can be used as his name. His very appearance is revealing. He is a swarthy, thin, long-haired man and wears tight-fitting jeans and dirty dark shirt. His cowboy boots are cracked and aged. Through him Ryga expresses his concern for the oppressed minority people all over the world. The Indian has no identity of his own; yet he can be identified with all suffering men. Watson, the White employer of the Indian and the Agent, a civil servant of the Indian Affairs Department, the other two characters in the play, symbolize the oppressing and moneyed class. So, at this level, the entire play can be interpreted as a struggle between the employer and the labourer. Watson represents exploitation, discrimination and inhuman attitude towards fellow human beings. The ethnic minorities get crushed under the heels of the economic power of the majority. It can make laws according to its need and convenience and force others to obey these laws blindly. The agent bears testimony to the long history of indifference and hypocrisy. The same people who exploit the minority maintain welfare agencies for these exploited minorities just as eyewash. It is nothing but sheer hypocrisy. At the expense of these oppressed class they lead comfortable life. It is nothing but cheating. The last words of the Indians are undoubtedly a severe warning to all concerned:

Where you go in such goddamn speed?
World too small to run' way? You hear
me, Sementos! Hi... Sementos! Ugh! (32)

The Indians are discriminated because of their colour, culture, language and habits which are different from the White majority. This discrimination results only in the alienation of the minority people from the national mainstream. The native Indians are restricted to reservations where they suffer untold miseries. If one Indian dies due to exploitation and total indifference, the another Indian performs mercy killing on his own brother to relieve him from agony and pain and yet another Indian enjoys the benefits given by the government assuming the dead Indian's identity. The Indian Affairs Department which is assigned with the duty of looking after the welfare of these Indians simply does not care about them. Nobody living outside the reservation knows what happens there. The Indians are cut off from the rest of the world and live like cattle and sheep. They are treated as non-human beings. They have no names, no identity of any kind. This is suggested by the absence of an article before the title of the play *Indian*. It shows the anonymity of the protagonist of this play. Throughout the play the Indian is addressed as "Indian" or as "fellow" as "boy". Names and birth certificates have no significance to him. Most of the native Indians do not even know their age; they were never named. Some of them are given names later in their lives as rewards for special achievements. The Indian symbolises segregation and alienation in general.

If the identity crisis is the result of segregation, submission is the result of harsh treatment. The native Indians depend on their merciless masters eternally and inevitably, who would only exploit them by extracting maximum work for the minimum wages. Watson compels the Indian to work by keeping his nephew Alphonse as a hostage. If he is still reluctant due to his inability, he threatens him saying that he would shoot down the kid. Though Watson knows that the Indian is hungry, he urges him to finish the work of driving posts for fence all alone. He is very particular that he (the Indian) must do work worth at least ten dollars as he had borrowed it the previous day just to buy a piece of baloney and Indian whiskey for himself and his friends.

When the Indian requests Watson to feed him and enable him to work he laughs sarcastically and says,

Feed ya? Soon's I get my ten bucks squared away, you
can lie down and die! But not on my field ... go on the road allowance! (12)

These lines stand as classical example for the harsh treatment meted out to the Indians. Watson is just one example of cruel employers. Another ruthless employer lets the Indian's brother die trapped in a clay pit. He sees him dying but never goes near to save him by lending a helping hand and dragging him out of the pit. The Indian calls his boss "sementos" which means one who has lost his soul.

The native Indians who live in reservation are victims of discrimination. Ryga presents what he himself saw in ghettos and reservations. The Indian is denied shelter; the basic needs of food and cloth are not available to him. He lives in a burnt tent in a "flat, gray, stark non-country" which symbolises the Indian's non-life. He is discriminated in social status, education and job. Poverty is imposed on him; he is compelled to live under deplorable social and physical conditions. When the Agent asks the Indian why he did not take his dying brother to hospital, he laughs bitterly and says,

Hospital! A dollar he took from dying man for the
 shovel buried in blue clay... hospital? Burn in hell!

.....

I ... kill ... my brother! ... Everything is
 gone, and I am old now.... only hunger an'hurt left now....

.....

I take off his shirt and pants- I steel everything I
 can were. Then I dig under tent, where ground is soft,
 and I bury my brother.... when I tell my brother's
 what I done, she not say anything for long time.

wife

Then she look at me with eyes that never make tears
 again. Take Alphonse, she say.... I go to live
 with every man who have me, to forget him.

Even the Whisky that is available to the Indians is only bad enough to kill them sooner. It is mixed with water from sick horse. These Indians are alcoholics and uneducated and therefore they become less eligible for any decent job. Towards the end of the play the Indian shouts,

I got nothing... nothing... no wallet, no money, no name, I got no past... no future...
 nothing. Sementos! I nobody, I not even live in this world...
 I dead! You get it... I dead. I never been
 anybody, I not just dead... I never live at all. (32)

This is not the cry of the one man but the whole race of the native Indians who have suffered enough of discrimination and exploitation and who have been reduced to nothing and non-living beings.

The play demonstrates the inhuman attitude of the majority people. The following conversation between Watson and the Indian can be quoted as an illustration:

Watson: it's half past nine, and you ain't
even begun to think about the fence.

Indian: Boss... a little bit later. I sick man...
head – She hurt to burst. An' stomach --
ugh; Boss, I not eat anything since piece
of baloney yesterday... (9--10)

But Watson is not moved. Instead he answers:

Watson: I got your kid in the grainery, locked up
so he'll keep. You try to run off after
your pals an' `T'm gonna take my gun and
shoot a hole that big through the kid's head; (9)

Watson makes a ring with his fingers to show the exact size of the injury he intends to make. He threatens the Indian like threatening a child or an animal to make it work. In a society full of Watson there is no room for humanism or human values. There is only enslavement and entombment. Healthy plants like love, brotherhood, equality, help and understandings never grow in the garden of these power-drunken people.

While Watson represents the dominant white society, the Agent represents the dominant white system. The Indian Affairs Department contributes nothing towards the betterment of the lives of the native Indians; it helps people like the Agent make their lives comfortable. The Agent's duty is to take care of the Indians. But he is not committed to the cause of the suffering minority; he is another sementos. He looks at every Indian with an eye of suspicion. He would ask, "Aren't those boots tight? I suppose you stole them". He accuses the Indian of having drunk home brew or shaving lotion. These accusations emanate from the deep contempt that he nurtures in his heart. Like the nameless Indian, he is also a nameless Agent. He too has no existence of his own and identity of any kind. He is a part of the exploitative machinery of the political system

which is only a failure. His attitude to the native Indians is always coloured by feelings of hostility, fear and hatred. According to the Agent, the Indian is a creature who indulges in all sorts of antisocial and illegal activities like drinking spurious liquor, stealing and killing. He is a potential threat being capable of killing his own brother. He is fit to live in jail and not in a civilized country like Canada. What the Agent forgets is the fact that the Indian is already “imprisoned” and “caged” in the reservations. The law that is not meant for protection and betterment deserves to be violated. The Agent is not even willing to lend his ears to listen to the genuine appeal of the miserable lot. He is scared of shouldering responsibilities; he has no moral courage to talk to the native Indians as a normal human being. This could be illustrated through the moose image. The Agent shot a moose two years back. It was badly hurt but not killed. Therefore, he is afraid of the possible consequences and has constantly run away from it. The Indians, like the moose, are left hurt and helpless. The Indian has to manhandle the Agent to force him to listen to his problems. The Agent thinks that the Indian might even kill him. His enquiry into the several problems of the Indians like the burnt tent and bad liquor and his visit to the working site are done only as his routine work without any sense of commitment or service motive.

The minority Indian community is shown with all its weakness and vices. The negative qualities prevent them from rising above their levels. The native Indians sometimes behave like irresponsible children. Most of them are dipsomaniacs and the White consider them as lazy undependable beings. These negative characteristics are shown neither to insult them nor to uphold the attitude of the whites, but, probably, to make them understand their problems and prompt them to make genuine attempts to overcome them. After all, a weak child needs more nourishment and needs to be trained about becoming a responsible citizen in the society. But, unfortunately, the Whites subject them to harsh treatment; they are not given decent jobs, enough wages and healthy living conditions.

Despite manifest poverty, ill-health, poor housing and lack of services, the life-style on reserves, traditional values like kinship and affiliation and the land itself contribute to the native Indian's identity and psychological well-being. The native Indians who migrate to the urban areas are unwelcome. Their facial features, accents, hairstyles, history and way of thinking alienate them from other city-dwellers and they feel like fish out of water in the “concrete jungle” of the civilized urban society. They see only a social and political vacuum around them. While *Indian* depicts the miseries of the Indian in rural settings, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* presents a native Indian girl in a similar predicament in the city. She comes to the city with the hope of getting a job. She

is caught by the police and charged with theft, vagrancy and prostitution. She appears before the Magistrate repeatedly and is ordered imprisonment repeatedly. The attitude of the White society grows progressively more and more antagonistic until the magistrate denounces Rita Joe as a social “leper” (like Indian). The allegorical murders rape and kill Rita Joe. Just as the climax of Indian is marked by the paradox of a murder which is also an apotheosis, Rita Joe’s death is her “ecstasy”.

A study of the play prompts us to accept Ryga’s claim that his first play *Indian* occupies a special place in his development as a dramatist:

Indian emerged out of the soil and wind of a situation in which I was painfully involved. It has been produced in this country and abroad—it has been used as teaching material in various schools of writing and as a training film in Hollywood to illustrate what television and film drama might be, but seldom is. Despite this, a CBC radio producer writing to me in April (1970) of this year was still moved to state he felt *Indian* was a poor drama with language forms he could not accept. So I leave where I began ... (“Notes in Retospect” pp. 4-5)

The attempts made by the Canadian government to enable the native Indian join the mainstream are futile. The consideration shown towards them and the concessions given to them are insufficient and therefore they still remain as a wound near the heart of the Canadian society.

Work Cited

All references to the text of the Play *Indian* are from the following edition only.

Ryga, George. 1970. *Indian*. Vancouver: Talon Books Ltd.