

George Ryga: A Postmodern Playwright

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George Ryga is, undoubtedly, the quintessence of postmodernism. He was born to immigrant parents in the farming community of Deep Creek in Northern Alberta. His family had arrived in Canada from what Ryga calls 'medieval Ukrainian villages' and this uprooting no doubt lies behind 'the sense of spiritual hopelessness[that] is common in his work,' and explains the need of 'many of the characters [to] define themselves by their relationship to a country they have lost or one they would never find'. Ryga feels strongly that Canadians would consider 'themselves capable of creating a national culture, part of which may be the presentation of Canadian drama, which is 'an accurate reflection of our life-condition', and which accepts 'the language and human qualifications of the people to whom and of whom it speaks' (Carson Neil).

Urjo Kareda, Tarragon's (theatre in Toronto) Artistic Director, whose of Ukrainian descent says, 'When my family came to Canada, the designation for us was displaced persons, usually shortened to DPs and often alliteratively decorated with 'dirty'. Immigrants and foreigners, refugees and aliens, newcomers and new Canadians are the formulations of national otherness produced in these decades [Kareda 9(4)]. Ryga thematizes this sense of frustration prevalent among the immigrants as well as among the natives. Until 1960, they did not have the right to vote and have always been treated as second class citizens. In 1990, Drew Hayden Taylor, the Canadian playwright had written a play called *Someday* which is a mirror of what was going on in regions all across Canada. The idea behind the government policy that urged the taking away of Native children from Native families was to help Canadianize Natives; to stamp out Native culture. He said in an interview that now when we have our voice, we can talk about things that take our voice away. He thinks it is anger from two angles: from the family who had the child ripped out, and from the child who wanted to know why he or she was taken away. On another level, it is the anger of somebody else deciding that your culture is not viable; that your way of life is not viable. "Trust us, we'll do better" is what those say who take the Natives' voice away , "We know best, we'll do better – or suffer the consequences"(Taylor 65). Ryga has voiced similar concern in his plays- *Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and *Indian*.

According to Verdicchia, the nationalism of the seventies has given way to globalism ; regionalism has gone out of fashion in favour of multiculturalism which supports multidimensional environment and inspires pluralistic attitude towards "acceptance tolerance and coexistence"(Chandra 473) . In the nineties, the frontiers of Canada were considered to be *Fronteras Americanas*, which was also the title of the play written by Argentinian-Canadian actor

/writer Guillermo Verdecchia, first produced in 1992. This Play reminds Canadians that they are part of the continent called America. Thus, “Multiculturalism is a negotiation between two or more cultures within the country and beyond it” (471).

Ignoring the distinction between postmodernism and post modernity (Giddens, 1990), I tend to discuss the social, political and economic changes delineated by Ryga in his plays, using the postmodern perspective. According to the *Postmodern Worldview*, the Western world society is an outdated lifestyle disguised under impersonal and faceless bureaucracies. The postmodernist endlessly debates the modernist about the Western society needing to move beyond their primitiveness of ancient traditional thought and practices. Their concerns, for example, often include building and using weapons of mass destruction, encouraging an unlimited amount of consumerism thus fostering a wasteful throwaway society at the sacrifice of the earth’s resources and environment, while at the same time not serving the fair and equitable socioeconomic needs of the populace.

Postmodernists believe that the West’s claims of freedom and prosperity continue to be nothing more than empty promises and have not met the needs of humanity. They believe that truth is relative and truth is up to each individual to determine for himself (Postmodernism-Truth).

In this context’ ‘otherness’, an important postmodern aspect deserves a special mention. It is defined by difference, typically difference marked by outward signs like race and gender. As such, otherness has also been associated predominantly with marginalized people, those who by virtue of their difference from the dominant group, have been disempowered, robbed of a voice in the social, religious and political world. Difference, in literature is often articulated as either some kind of weakness or superior strength or intellect depending on the sympathies of the dominant cultural voice. For example, (and as a generalization) in Colonial literature the native is either portrayed as the innocent Noble Savage or the barbaric cannibal. Without the permission from the dominant social group to speak, marginalized people cannot tell their own story, cannot define them, but rather, must submit to the descriptions assigned to them by the dominant sense of self, and their sense of value. Yet, continental philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, argues that the self cannot exist, cannot have a concept of itself as self, without the other. “I am defined as subjectivity, as a singular person, as an ‘I’, precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that make me an individual ‘I’” (Kearney 62).

In recent times the figure of the other, hitherto silent and effaced, has made claims to speak, indeed to speak *back*, disrupting the realm of politics in radical ways: thus women, ‘natives’, minorities, deviants, subalterns, now claim to speak *as* others (Onbelet).

Postmodernism does not stress on fragmented society, but it emphasizes that all cultures should be understood in context and at the same time efforts should be made “not for assimilation but for cooperation on the basis of difference...being in touch with your cultural identity and pre-judgments, having a sense of agency, and looking to an acceptance of diversity and a search for that which is held in common.”

I shall begin with a survey of three key plays of George Ryga, viz. *Indian; Ecstasy of Rita Joe and Seven Hours to Sundown*, which pose questions regarding identity, recognition, race and politics of representation.

Among his famous plays, *Indian* is closest to the realistic pole. It deals with the basic problem of belonging. The protagonists' story is in a way the story of Everyman, because each individual in some way or other, shares this human predicament. The protagonist of the play *Indian*, the nameless Indian is a universal symbol; the name of any oppressed man can be his name (Thomas 229). Ryga titles his play as *Indian*, omitting the article, and the nameless Indian becomes a universal symbol. He is Everyman. Through him, Ryga expresses his concern for the oppressed minority all over the world. The Indian has no identity of his own; yet he can be identified with all suffering men. When the Agent asked the Indian about his name, he replies, "Mebee I forget.... Mebbe I got no name at all." (Ryga 16). Later, he questions the Agent, "How many of us got birth certificates to give us name an age on reserve?" (20). According to Albert Glapp, "Names and birth certificates do not mean anything to him.... Some of them are given individual names only later in their lives as rewards for special achievements" (101).

The Indian is depicted as "drunken, undependable and lazy"- the sins white society historically attribute to them. The action confines itself to one extended scene (landscape, a flat, grey, stark, and non-country) in which the Indian is harassed by his boss man, Watson, and later by a nameless Indian Affairs Agent. The Agent does not have the clear-cut malignancy of Watson, the boss man. He is just an average well meaning White liberal. However, he finds his ethics severely abused when the Indian tells him how after his brother had been critically injured by a cave-in while digging the clay pit, he (the Indian) performed a mercy killing. At the end, the Agent flees the scene, his car driving dust across the state, and the Indian is left driving his hammer at the head of a post, an indicator of what he would like to do the white "sementos," the soul trader's of the world (Lawrence 81-82). Ryga, here, tries to draw the audience into the Indian's experience and thought process. At first, from the outside, the Indian seems like a racist cliché: lazy, drunken and dangerously moody, changing quickly to nihilistic violence. But with the movement from the employer Watson to the Indian Agent, we are drawn gradually into the Indian's experience. All his behavior is revealed from the central fact of personal despair, expressed in his speech at the end:

I never had been anybody. I not just dead....

I never live at all. What is matter?

What anything matter, sementos? (Ryga 32)

This, in turn, summarizes the wider racial despair of "All Indians same-nobody?" (32). From this centre springs his feeling that white society is merely the Indian's prison.

"Ours is a civilized country..." (30), says the Agent in the play. But in the so called civilized country, some people are being prejudiced and discriminated just because the colour of the skin happens to be black or brown. They are segregated from the White people just because they belong to different ethnic group whose culture, language and food are different from those of the White people. The Agent's encounter with the Indian vividly dramatizes the insurmountable cultural differences between them.

The Ecstasy of Rita Joe is another play which describes the story of an Indian girl, Rita, on a reserve, who leaves her family and follows her lover to the city. There, she is arrested on a series of charges like prostitution, vagrancy, and shoplifting and finally raped and murdered. The trial is central to the play. She is given eight hours to find witnesses who can testify to her character. She turns to her, lover; father; the priest and the teacher but none of them can help her. Ultimately, the law condemns her and she is murdered. The play depicts the duplicity of the Canadian White establishment in dealing with the natives. Though Canada talks about promoting multiculturalism, wherein, different ethnic groups can live together by retaining their individual identities, thus becoming a cultural mosaic, the reality is different. The play clearly shows that Canadian society is a racist society that practices overt and covert racism, as is seen in the treatment, meted out to the people belonging to different ethnic backgrounds.

There is a world of difference between values practiced by the Whites and Indians. Ryga shows Rita's inability to assimilate into the White establishment, which brings her destruction. At the beginning, the magistrate appears to be kind and greatly concerned for Rita's welfare. But, as the play progresses, he becomes more and more hostile towards her and is bent upon her destruction. The magistrate says, "the obstacles to your life are here – in your thoughts – possibly in your culture" (Ryga 69). She is then asked "to fix her hair, tame her accent and then perhaps change her name" (69). According to Rorty, there is no universal moral reality "to which our moral judgments might hope to correspond, as our physical science supposedly corresponds to physical reality." At this stage, we might ask, If there is no objective moral reality, why concern ourselves with ethical issues? While this seems a reasonable next step, Postmodernists are not comfortable with abandoning ethics completely and instead are driven to search within their worldview for a standard of right and wrong (Postmodern Ethics). Vanhoozer reveals how Postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard "acknowledges that the central issue of Postmodernity is the possibility of ethics, that is, right action." The next question becomes, How is right action determined? Vanhoozer explains, "Lyotard, for his part, is content to live with 'little narratives.'" If philosophical truth (what we can know about reality) resides in the local community, it follows that moral truth (how we should behave) resides in the same community. This is what Lyotard means when he says, he is content to live with "little narratives." Since there is no "grand narrative" telling us what is real and how to behave, each community develops its own "little narratives" to fulfill those needs. The basic assumption of postmodernity is that a person is always standing in the world, with at least "one foot in" one's body, temporality, language, society, culture, history, tradition, etc. (Postmodern Ethics).

Ryga's attack on church apprises us of the religion in its postmodern spirit, that is, the minimalist conceptions of "God. Rita's ironical statements- First, when she relates her uncle Dan Joe's last words that "Long ago the Whiteman comes with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years ... then we had all the bibles, an' the Whiteman had our land", and second, when she says, "Go, tell your God... about Rita Joe and what they done to her! Tell him about yourself too! That you were not good enough for me but that didn't stop your trying" (Ryga 97), affirm that we can only know God in relation to us, but not in God's self. Gordon Kaufman, a senior statesman on the theological scene has moved from more traditional

understandings of God. In his latest work, *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman identifies God with "serendipitous creativity"(264-80). Kaufman opts against attributing to God personality, consciousness in any sense, intentionality, or agency (268-72, 329). Kaufman even expresses an unwillingness to assign any actual transcendence to God, finding it sufficient to identify God with, or as wholly within, the cosmic process (1993:271-72).

In a similar vein to Kaufman, Sallie McFague declare in *Models of God* that all Christianity claims "with any assurance" about ultimate reality is that it is supportive of life and its fulfillment, and she parenthetically adds--claiming more than Kaufman- that this power is "personal" (x). Anything beyond that reveals something about how human beings should or do understand themselves, their society, and their world, but does not reveal anything more about God. In 1940's, Henry Nelson Wiemann developed a process perspective that identified God with the growth of value in the universe. Similarly, John Dewey identified God as the process of human being interacting with the larger environment, ever creating new values (Nikkel 3-5).

In Postmodern era, multiple voicing argument has resulted in challenges to the canon--"We studied a particular view of history, that of the dominant ruling class. ... Should we not teach Canadian authors in Canadian schools? Should not Margaret Lawrence, George Ryga and Stephen W.O Mitchel be on the curriculum. My children learned about the Oklahoma drought depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but never studied about the Canadian drought of *The Drylanders*. They learned about racism in Southern US from *In the Heat of the Night*, but never about Canadian racism illustrated in the works of George Ryga. They studied American history, but have never read about the French and Ukrainians in the western Canada of Gabrielle Roy (Hlynka). In Ryga's *Seven Hours to Sundown* an encounter between Kiosk and Goyda occurs when Goyda supports teaching Canadian History to the students. In the postmodern model, we don't really "know" anything; rather, we "interpret." Postmodernist education says "Pick a worldview," as if only a choice of clothing style were at issue, "and create your interpretations accordingly," since *truths* are only language constructions put in place by those who have influence and power. Kiosk dislikes this "counter culture" represented by Goyda and "dismisses him from his teaching post for challenging the system" (Innes). The postmodernist educator says that the emphasis in Western education on rationality and the quest for what is ultimately true is only another manifestation of Western "cultural imperialism" motivated by consumer capitalist power (Hurd R.Wesley).

In Postmodern world, image is everything, image is reality. Disneyland, MTV, MacDonald's is real life. Real life is what we see on television, television becomes real life. Krishan Kumar maintains that postmodernists see the media in a quite different way to those who regard it as merely a method of communication (Burke, Barry). "For them they today do not so much communicate as construct. In their sheer scale and ubiquity they are building a new environment for us, one which demands a new social epistemology and a new form of response. The media have created a new 'electronic reality', suffused with images and symbols, which has obliterated any sense of an objective reality behind the symbols...In hyper reality it is no longer possible to distinguish the imaginary from the real..." (Kumar 1997:99). Sid Kiosk is shown as a

representative of corrupt politics. The role of media for acquiring power and fame is revealed when he phones up to Dolan to chide an editorial, which ignores him:

[...] I'm not happy about your damned editorial...not one bit!...How come Henderson gets identified as a hardware merchant an'I just get named?...I've advertised farm produce with you .I don't like it when bigger advertisers get free plugs for their businesses out of an election campaign. An'I don't like that insinuation that deadbeats got elected this time ...Running the town is a big job these days...I ran a good vigorous campaign [...]. (Ryga, Seven Hours 8-9)

Deleuze says that society is a series of "territorializations" or inscriptions upon the "body without organs", or the free-flowing matter of intensive qualities filling space in their varying degrees. The first inscriptions are relations of kinship and filiation structuring primitive societies, often involving the marking and scarring the human bodies. As an interruption and encoding of "flows," the primitive inscriptions constitute a nexus of desiring machines, both technical and social, whose elements are humans and their organs. The full body of society is the sacred earth, which appropriates to itself all social products as their natural or divine precondition, and to whom all members of society are bound by direct filiation (Deleuze 1983b, 141-142). These first inscriptions are then de-territorialized and re-coded by the "despotic machine," who alone stands in direct filiation to the deity (Deleuze 1983b, 192) and who institutes the mechanism of the state upon pre-existing social arrangements. Finally, capitalism de-territorializes the inscriptions of the despotic machine and re-codes all relations of alliance and filiation into flows of money (Deleuze 1983b, 224-227). The organs of society and the state are appropriated into the functioning of capital, and humans become secondary to the filiation of money with itself. This capitalist money system is "an axiomatic of abstract quantities that keeps moving further and further in the direction of the deterritorialization of the socius" (Deleuze 1983a, 33), which is to say that capital is inherently schizophrenic.

Goyda detests the world which is getting too much involved in mercenary activities. He hates the society not giving any value to the talent of the person but every time busy making the plans of earning more and more money. One day a man came to him with an offer of forty thousand dollars to put his label only on items he would buy, which he would hold for a few years and then re-sell to his wealthy friends at three times the price. Goyda refused to sign the contract for it would have meant that, "[...], I sold everything ... what talents I have ... my name ... my reputation ... even what I said privately or publicly. It was servitude for the rest of my life! [...]" (Ryga 64).

An attempt to destroy old church building is another instance of capitalistic society, which Goyda wants to preserve for cultural heritage. Irma gets frustrated on seeing the two parties slandering each other: the successful revolution becoming an establishment and targeting the opponent:

Irma. [...] You are moving headstones in a country graveyard ... dead
Dead ... no feeling ... no tears... no remorse... no hope. You're
no different than he was! It's just a killing game ... Nobody
cares for anybody! (103).

The power struggle between Sid Kiosk and Goyda ultimately culminates in the death of Irma.

In Post-modernism, “identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid or shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms (Kumar 1997:98). We are all unique and have our own distinctiveness but we also have much common. The identities are socially constructed and given meaning by our fragmented society (Burke 2000). Irma brands Goyda as an “outsider” in spite of the fact that he has been living there for fifteen years; he began his teaching career there; developed his business there and most of his friends are there. He asks Irma as to “What makes an insider” (Ryga 19). Even for Kiosk, the journey from the carrot farm to the chair of the mayor has been full of many sufferings. He tells his daughter that they were treated as “low-level scruff in this town” (24). His father came as a working immigrant while the Englishmen came like royalty. They never addressed his father by name, even though he emigrated from the same country they did- “Hey, chappie”, they used to call him making a gesture with their forefingers as if they were calling a dog...(23).

Another aspect highlighted by Ryga is the parent-child antagonism. In the new millennium of cultural awakening individual aspirations are pitted against community values. What the circumstance spells out is a juxtaposition of moral and ethical values of an individual and his socio-cultural environment. In most cases, socio-cultural situation becomes a battering force against which individuals struggle for survival. Kiosk loves his daughter very much but they are separated in attitude and lifestyle, with Kiosk representing a typical bourgeois attitude. He does not like that his daughter works in a small leather workshop in collaboration with Goyda:

[...]. To cut leather and sew buttons is not a man’s way of making a Living, an’ nothing’s ever going to change my way of thinking? (15).

He fails to realize his daughter’s state of mind –her love for craft and her inclination towards Jerry Goyda.

Existentialism asserts that people actually make decisions based on the meaning to them rather than rationally. Existence precedes essence, which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes what could be called his or her “essence” instead of there being a predetermined essence that defines what it is to be a human. Thus, the human being -through his consciousness- creates his own values and determines a meaning to his life. Soren Kierkegaard maintained that the individual is solely responsible for giving his or own life meaning and for living that life passionately and sincerely, inspite of many existential obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, alienation and boredom. Existentialism became fashionable in the post-world war years as a way to reassert the importance of human individuality and freedom (Existentialism). Being deceived in love by his beloved who left with some charlatans, Goyda becomes indifferent to love and calls this world as “a forgotten receding world”. He becomes hateful of the ignorant people and believes that “ignorance not only stinks. It inflicts pain” (Ryga 34). His abhorrence to love gives great pain to Irma who is already trying to find an answer to the question- “Why I’m not loved. Why I’ll never be loved” (49). The revelation of the fact that the man with whom she once fell in love didn’t love her made her feel dejected and she left Winnipeg. Even kiosk thinks the other way. The elopement of his wife Ella with a kite

flying rancher causes him to think “That frivolous side of Ella..., has reappeared in Irma, who quits a perfectly suitable job in Winnipeg to work at craft in her small town”(Parker). “Although Sid Kiosk genuinely loves his daughter, his fascist methods as a mayor and his rigidity as a father result in Irma’s death punishing him in the end”(Parker D 64).

Ryga observes that the role of the individual is really minimal and decisions are made en masse. It is tragic that individual initiative doesn’t work, it doesn’t pay off (Parker). Rita Joe, Jamie Paul, Indian, Goyda, Irma and Kiosk- all find themselves helpless in the face of the society they are confronting. This is exactly the idea that Foucault voiced. He raised the question on the ability of human beings to affect the world they are living in. He argued that human societies can be seen as places in which forms of knowledge (discourses) exercise power over us through the way we think and the way we behave. The individual is no longer the source of meaning, in line with Enlightenment thinking, but is ‘decentered’ (Burke, Barry). The human subject is not inherently free ‘but hedged in on all sides by social determinations’ (Layder 95).

It seems that Ryga, like other Postmodernists does not attempt to tell what is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. A postmodernist views the world outside of themselves as being in error, that is, other people’s truth becomes indistinguishable from error. Therefore, no one has the authority to define truth or impose his idea of moral right and wrong upon others. It is believed that there isn’t such a thing as absolute truth (Postmodernism-Truth).

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