Marginalisation in George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*

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George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is one of the finest modern tragedy on marginalisation. It is about the marginalisation of North American Indians in Canada. It is a macabre marginalisation and portrayal of the pitiable plight of the impulsive Indians – the life of the Joes (David Joe, the father, Rita Joe, his elder daughter and Eileen Joe his younger daughter) and Jaimie Paul, Rita’s lover.

The white regime marginalising the black (i.e. the Indians living in Canada) is the axle of the play. In this two act structured play, Ryga has touchingly word-painted the horrible life led by these characters. The marginalising attitude of the whites against the Indians is a kind of reeking vengeance against other races. By marginalisation, the Whites wanted to dominate the world (other people).

In this marginalisation, deaths one after another take place. The victims Rita Joe and Jaimie Paul are not just mere individuals. They represent the youth of Indian community. Their sufferance is not merely the sufferance of the two youngsters. But it is the condition of youngsters (young lovers) of Indian community in Canada. Youngsters are not allowed to get married and live husband and wife. They are marginalised to the extent of committing suicide or killing by the social evils. The marginalisation of these characters is not a single incident. But history has recorded, “Some twenty Indian girls like Rita Joe perish each year in Vancouver alone, first prostituted, then killed because white society will accept them only in the role of dependents” (Parker 181)

The marginalisation takes place at many levels in the life of the characters, especially, the heroine Rita Joe. It is on 1) the plane of Justice (court) 2) Police Station, 3) School premises 4) place of work, 5) Neighbourhood and 6) Religious place (Church). In all these places, the characters are marginalised, driven to the extent of despair, decomposition and death. The play has no parallel with any play of Shakespeare, no scenic division in each act. Ryga’s play has a unique structure of two acts.

The opening is about the marginalisation in the place of law (court). The major character, Rita Joe is brought to the court by two policemen. She is falsely charged. In the court, the first
sermon of the White Judge proves the marginalisation, “Who is she? Can she speak English?” (p.16) This is her feel depressed. His sermon has the fruit of marginalising. “To understand life in a given society, one must understand laws of that society. All relationships…, Man to man… man to woman… man to property, man to the state… freedom that was yours today. Your home and well-being were protected.” (p.17) This speech is a kind of mind twister. Did it really offer freedom to the Indians? Was their life protected? This is only in print. In practicality it means the opposite. They don’t have freedom either to speak openly or to live as they accustomed to - it is only a kind of threatening to them. Their homes and well-being are not really protected.

**Marginalization in the Police Station**

Rita Joe working in a whiteman’s tire company returns late in the evening from her workplace. When she tries to catch a cab to her place where she is lodging, she is picked up by the police. They give five dollars and arrest her, take her to the police station and the next day produce her in the court of law. The White Magistrate accuses her of vagrancy. She is thus pushed to the margin. She is sent to the prison after the hearing.

Rita is not a meek character. She protests against the injustice done to her. She openly criticises the white regime maintaining the jails in a poor condition. “There was no windows… The jail stinks! People in jail stink like paper that’s been in the rain too long. But a jail stinks worse. It stinks of rust.” (p.23) Thus though she is marginalised to a jail, she protests against the condition that exists there.

The play partly recalls the court scenes very realistically. The white Magistrate opens a folder and reads out that special constables, Eric Wilson and Schneider found her on 18th June by 9.40 pm. in the Fourth Avenue. She was arrested for the charge of prostitution. As a protest she bursts out, “That’s godammed lie!” She puts forth her side to the Justice, that she was returning home trying to find the highway. The cops thrust five dollar bills in her pocket and falsely charged her. This is not only the case of Rita Joe but also the case of girls thousands of innocent Indian girls in Canada. Young Indian girls are marginalised so as not to lead a calm and happy family life.

When Rita repudiates in the court, the Magistrate reminds her that she needs good witness (reference), and he will give 8 hours to find witness for her, from the society – some people who will come to the court to substantiate what she wants to prove – that she is of a good
character. She knows pretty well that no English man/woman will certify her as a good woman. Because, it is the tendency of the Whites to marginalize the other races. There is no point in stooping and so she protests in the court at every juncture. She asks him, “Can I bum a cigarette?” He asserts, “No, you can’t smoke in court.” (p.41)

Now the Magistrate raises a doubt which he has about the little girl with her he once saw in the Cariboo country. She was wearing a blouse and skirt and he wondered what she’d wear in winter. That idea was nauseating to her, because he was under the impression that it was Rita’s illegitimate child but, in fact, it was her younger sister Eileen Joe, whom she had to take care of when their mother breathed her last. She protests when he tried to corner (marginalise) her, she shouts, “I don’t hide my child; nobody would get my child. I would sooner kill it an’ bury it first.” (p.43)

Later her sister, Eileen Joe came to the city and tried to establish as a dress maker. She thought that city can give a new life to her. But unfortunately, nobody gave her any tailoring work because of the racial discrimination and White’s marginalisation. After waiting for two weeks, she returned to the reserve to help her father catch fish and cut pulpwood. Thus Eileen Joe also became a victim of the White’s marginalisation.

In the fourth trial, Rita is before the Magistrate. He reads, “This is the seventh charge against you in one year… Laws are not made to be violated… Why did you steal?” (p. 48) She quips, “I was hungry, I had no money…” (p. 48) “I stole a sweater… They caught me in five minutes!” Since the white society didn’t allow her to live honourably and she was marginalised at every venture, she had to go out of the way for her existence.

Policemen in the court argue before the Magistrate, “She was born and raised on a reservation. Then came a brief period in a public school off the reservation… at which time Rita Joe established herself as something of a disruptive influence.” (p.49) The Magistrate explains that she is a trouble maker. Without knowing the truth, police accuses her. The Magistrate also not listening to her, comments that she is a trouble maker.

Rita recalls the incident which took place while she was going to the school. It was about a horse. “I was riding a horse to school an’ some of the boys short a rifle an’ my horse bucked an’ I fell off. I fell in the bush an’ got scratched. The boys caught the horse… and tried to ride him, but the horse bucked an’ pinned a boy against a tree, breaking his leg in two places” (pp.
49-50). So, in no way she was a trouble maker but troubles were given to her even by her classmates.

The Magistrate as though with a touch of compassion entreats, her “Look at you, woman! Each time you come before me your are older.” Indirectly he wanted to say that she is ploughed by many men. She begs, “I’m tired and an’ I want to eat, mister! I haven’t had grub since day before yesterday”. (p.50) So she wants to go home. But he denies permission, “… you can’t go now. You’ve broken a law for which you will have to pay a fine or go to prison.” (p.51) She retorts, “I have no money. The Magistrate bluffs out, “It is against the law to solicit men on the street…”

Rita again requests him to allow her to go home, for, her father David Joe is not well. But he sidetracks the issue. He began to preach,

Prison and fines are not the only thing…. Have you, for instance, considered that you might be an incurable carrier? There are people like that…. They cannot come into contact with others without infecting them. They cannot eat from dishes others may use…. They cannot prepare or touch food others will eat… The same with clothes, cars, hospitals, beds! (p. 58)

She never expected that the Magistrate will accuse that she is a carrier of venereal diseases. Since it is beyond her thinking, she swoons and falls down.

**Marginalisation in the School**

Miss Donahue, Rita’s school teacher (of English origin) who taught Rita comes to the court only to heap false charges against Rita and she does not testify as Rita expected. She accuses, “I tried to teach you, but your head was in the clouds, and as for your body…. Arguing… always trying to upset me… and in grade four… I saw it then… pawing the ground for men like a bitch in heat”. (pp.66-67).

Rita begs her, “That’s a lie! For God’s sake, tell the judge, I have a good character… I am clean an’ honest… I’m never gonna argue again… I believe in God… an’ I’m from the country and lost like hell!” (p.67) Thus a teacher who should speak truth and do good here, because of marginalisation, she speaks untruth and does bad to Rita.

The school board clerk (in which Rita studied) comes to the court not to help Rita Joe but to accuse her as her teacher Miss Donahue did. He tells the Magistrate that he sent a letter to her asking her to come to the school to take her grade five certificate for which she never responded.
She as usual fights for her rights before the Magistrate telling that she never received the letter from the school and the English postman, “that drunken bastard Mahoney used it to light fire in his store… He’d never tell Indians when mail came for us!” (p.76) So her reply proves two points, i) The English postman never informs or delivers letters to Indians, ii) He uses their letters to light fire in his store. Is this not white’s marginalisation against Indians?

**Marginalisation in the Workplace**

In the workplace too Rita has to face marginalisation. Though her white boss, Steve Laporte gave her job, it is not out of real sympathy for her. He tried to molest / corner/ marginalise her but she escaped from it wisely. He tells the Magistrate,

Gave her a job in my tire store… took her over to my place after work once… She was scared when I tried a trick… Well, Sir, she took the money, then she stood in front of the window, her head high an’ her naked shoulders shakin’ like she was cold… She cried a little an’ then she says, “Goddammit, but I wish I was a school teacher…” (p.46).

**Marginalisation in the Neighbourhood**

Even the people in her neighbourhood tried to marginalise (exploit) her. David Joe, Rita’s father tries to tell the story of her past - she was a little girl of four years and her sister Eileen was getting big inside their mother. It was a hot day. Sandy Collins who ran the sawmill came to their house. Business was bad for him. He came to tell David, “My little Millie got a cough last night an’ today she’s dead. David Joe… Look, you got another kid coming… Won’t make much difference to you. Sell me Rita Joe like she is for a thousand dollars!” (p.73). For which David told him it is a lot of money. For this Sandy told him, “Not a Thousand cash at once… First I give you two hundred and fifty dollars… when Rita Joe comes ten years old and she’s still alright, I give you the next two hundred and fifty … An’ if she don’t die by fifteen, I guarantee you five hundred dollars cash at once” (p.73). Thus the mentality of the whites reveal their exploiting Indians and how they try to estimate low the Indians. David was a daily labourer, yet he was a man with self - prestige and had real love for his daughter and so he didn’t agree to sell Rita to Sandy Collins.
Marginalisation in the Social Centre

Mr. Homer, the English man who runs the Centre for Indians also tries his level best to marginalise Rita Joe. He tries to recall before the Magistrate, “on a Friday night I give her some soup an’ a sandwich. Then all of a sudden in the middle of a silly argument, she goes haywire… an’ I see her comin’ at me … I’ll tell you, I was scared! I don’t know Indian women that well!” (p.75). He also falsifies her image by accusing that she came to slap him and in reality she didn’t want to do.

Marginalisation in the Church

The English Priest also tries his level best to use (molest) Rita and so he tries to play a drama. He goes to the prison to see her. He gives her cigarettes and a match box. According to the prison regulation, this should not be allowed. As though he is really interested in her, he says, he’ll meet the warden to help her. He bemoans, “City is not place for you nor for me” (p. 82) She retorts that atleast he has God on his side but she has none. She wails, “I don’t think God hears me here. Nobody hears me now…Nobody except cops an’ pimps an’ bootleggers.” (p.83)

The Priest tries to possess her, “I worry about you …. I baptized you… I watched you and Leenie grow into women.” (p.83) She replies, “I seen God in what you said… In your clothes! In your hair!” (p.83) This is a shock to the Priest because he tries his level best to brainwash her, so that she may yield to him. He angers, “You’ re not the woman I expected you to be… Your pride, Rita… your pride… may bar you from heaven!” Rita is also not that much loose in her character as he expects her to be. “I know all about you and so does God!” she retorts. Then she recalls, what her uncle Dan Joe told when he was in his death bed, “Long ago the white man come 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…” (p.84) This clearly proves that whites exploited the poor (Indians) by telling about religion; by giving Bibles, they took away the land of Indians.

The priest advises her, “Don’t blame the Church! We are trying to help…” (p.84). He pressurizes her to be humble and confess and he’s going by four o’ clock and he will report her father about her for which she cries out, “You go to hell! Go tell your God…. When you see him. Tell him about Rita Joe an’ what they done to her! Tell him about yourself too!... That you were
not good enough for me, but that didn’t stop you try in’! Tell him that!” (p.85) “She rejected him because of his evil intentions” (Balachandran, *Essays on Canadian Literature* 163).

In spite of all her problems, Rita Joe is able to survive all kinds of marginalisation because of her bravery and also because of true love which she has from Jaimie Paul. Some times she even used to advise him, “You need a good job to have babies in the city. Clara Hill gave both her kids to foster homes” (p.90) which she can’t follow. Everybody is scared in the white society. And during such weak moments he infuses her confidence. Some times she exhorts him, “to stop worrying.” (p.91) The Magistrate pronounces the judgement that Rita is sentenced for thirty days in prison. Jaimie is very angry with him. He outbursts, “Teach me who I really am! You’ve taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man!” (p.111) For this, the Magistrate tells him, “There is room for dialogue. There is room for disagreement and there is room for social change… but within the framework of institutions and traditions in existence for that purpose.” (p.111)

When she is much disspirited, David, her father is ready to take Rita to his home, but she is unwilling. Jaimie is not ready to leave her and affirms, “She’s with me.” Rita quips, “Very torn.” He persuades her not to go to her father’s home because her father is an old man having nothing to give or say. Also he is of a stooping type – the type which is liked by the Whites. He’ll listen to what the Whites say, do what they ask him to do. He is not an assertive type, asking for rights. The Magistrate further sermonizes, “It is a struggle just to stay alive… That struggle is mine, as well as yours, Rita Joe! The jungle of the executive has as many savage teeth ready to go for the throat… Your days and hours are numbered.” (p.118)

The three murderers hover over them. Jaimie tells her, “Don’t be scared… Nothing to be scared of….” They approach him. One of them makes a sudden lurch at Jaimie. Jaimie gives him a flying kick, knocks him down. All the three surround him and attack him. On seeing this, Rita screams and runs to him. But one of the murderers has grabbed Rita. The other two beat Jaimie and leave him in the path of approaching train. Now all the three murderers approach her with nervous fear and lust. She breaks away from them. They drag her, pull her legs open and one culprit lowers himself on her. She calls, “Jaimie! Jaimie! Jaimie.” (p.124) Her head rolls over. The third murderer rising her twisted, broken body, tells “Shit… She’s dead.” He indulges in necrophilic rape. Thus the marginalisation of the Whites has taken two lives – the life of Jaimie Paul and Rita Joe. In this way the play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* strikingly presents the
societal pressures which threatened the lives of the poor Indians in Canada and how Rita Joe, David Joe and Jaimie Paul try their level best to liberate themselves from it.” (Balachandran The Atlantic Critical Review, p.66)

As Parker calls Jaimie is defeated on a “social level” and Rita Joe on “sexual level” (p. XIII) The plays is about “the majority’s oppression efforts and the minority’s survival efforts” (Balachandran p. 267). Robert Crew wrote, “In fact what is as trial here in the Whiteman’s treatment of native Indians and by extension any dominant majority’s treatment of a disadvantage minority group.” (p.65)

Is there social change in the Canadian society as the White Magistrate claims? The answer seems to be negative. Social change should have taken place at least after this play was staged (1967). James Barber writes, “George Ryga has painted a simple, disturbing picture of life without dignity and without hope” (p.57). “It is not the mistake of Ryga to paint a disturbing picture. It is the duty of an artist, a dramatist to cut open the social blisters and remove the puss and make the body (society) a healthy one” (Balachandran p.93). By writing this play, Ryga has become a social physician. He is a dramatist with much social concern.

Jack Richards opines, “Ryga does not preach. He does not paint either side with the colours of martyrs or saints. He says only that there are two worlds in our society and neither understands, nor accepts the other.” (p.56). Each Societies (the Native Canadians and the Settled Indians) has to understand the other positively. The marginalisation is because there is no proper understanding on either side: each one has to accept the survival of the other magnanimously. If it happens, there will not be temptation and tension, despair and death, misunderstanding and mismanagement but happiness and harmony, recognition and redemption, progress and peace.

Nathen Cohen has aptly judged Ryga, “The only thing real in the entire performance is the author’s sense of outrage. Clearly he feels that Indians are harshly treated, and society is insensitive to its crime or to its need to make expiation.” (p.58) Writers should not be like mud dolls of yester years but like a modern doll of drum beater. Ryga beats his drum to awaken the conscience of Canadians particularly and all the oppressive forces in general. That is why Neil Carson said The Ecstasy of Rita Joe deals “seriously with important social issues.” (p.67) The social issues are marginalisation and racial discrimination. Nathan Cohen has rightly pointed that “the play is about Indians’ mistreatment by the Whiteman in this country.” [Canada] (p.58) The play can be considered, “as a conflict between the two races, the Indian race Canadian race.”
(Balachandran p.88) Because of this, Jamie Portman commented about this play, “it touched off a Canadian cultural ferment that still continues today.” (p.65)

Balachandran observes,

Ryga’s picturing of the race problems (The white supremacy over the ‘black’ Indians) brings him on a par with Abraham Lincoln who fought against the Negro Slavery. Though the Canadians may hesitate to acknowledge, the Canadian Indians, (Indian Immigrants) have to be grateful to Ryga for his un stinted, unequivocal, unforgettable, unraveling of their pitible plights through this play (p.165)

Through this play what does Ryga want to emphasise? “All should strive for a happy family structure, observance of religion and law without any partiality. Impartiality alone will give happiness to all and pave way for a successful family structure, meaningful religion and useful law” (Balachandran, p.270)

Is there social significance in the play? Heather Robertson writes, “The play’s social significance is pretty chilling – an Indian girl who is convicted of prostitution, raped and killed could be appalling.” (p.63) The play is really appalling and alarming, portraying the Canadians’ applauding and Indians’ appellating.

What is the vision of Ryga in this play? Ryga’s vision in this play seems to be, “people (whites) should be broad minded enough to allow the Indians’ dream blossom into a new life with happiness and contentment.” (Balachandran p.118). An end should be put to marginalisation and martyrdom. There should be plays for matrimony of Indian lovers in Canada: meditation and maturity on the part of the Canadians. Marginalisation is a menace. Hence it should be mended to humaneness. Indians are not either midgets or milksops. They are also human beings like the whites (Canadian). Canadians should not be misanthropes and there should not be misdemeanour on the part of the Whites.

**Primary Source**

**Secondary Sources**


