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**MANIFESTING THE MI'KMAQ CULTURAL TAPESTRY THROUGH THE POEMS
OF RITA JOE**

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ABSTRACT

Rita Joe is a well-known Canadian poet and song writer. She belongs to the Mi'kmaq community. Rita Joe speaks about her childhood in foster homes and her education in residential schools. Her poetry collections bring out the experiences and the challenges faced by the Indigenous people in Canada. Her writings help her claim her Aboriginal heritage. Her poems highlight the importance of their traditional values to the world. This paper entitled “Manifesting the Mi'kmaq Cultural Tapestry through the Poems of Rita Joe” tries to accentuate the cultural importance and heritage of Mi'kmaq Community. Micmacs are one among the various indigenous people who are unfamiliar to the world. Rita Joe wishes to portray them as who they are and make them familiar to the world by bringing out their cultural traditions. Her songs are gentle because she needs to have a friendly relationship with the people.

Key Words: Aborigines, culture, familiarization, native people, identity.

Indigenous people are the descendants of the earliest known inhabitants of an area, especially one that has been colonized by the settlers. The term indigenous has been first used by the Europeans who used to differentiate indigenous peoples of the Americas from the European settlers. The term was first used by Sir Thomas Browne in 1646. People are usually described as Indigenous when they maintain traditions or other aspects of an early culture that has been associated with the first inhabitants of a given region. They exhibit a nomadic lifestyle across a large territory. Indigenous societies are found in every inhabited climate zone and continent of the world except Antarctica. There have been more than five thousand indigenous nations throughout the world. Indigenous Literature is any piece written by an indigenous person. Their works describe about their traditions, their relationship with nature and their experience of injustice. The indigenous works are really emotional and also it gives insight to the indigenous culture and helps in understanding better. In Rita Joe's poems, the stories change over with time and with each speaker. The language is so poetic and it makes the readers so moving. The main aim of the indigenous literature is to understand and appreciate the culture, history and humanity of native people.

Indigenous people of Canada are culturally diverse. Each group has its own literature, language, and culture. Culture is the way of life of a group of people who share similar beliefs and customs. The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin term '*Cult* or *cultus*' which means cultivating or refining. It is also the representation of the way in people think and do things. It is also the things that people have as a society and is a human-made environment which includes all the material and non-material products of a group that are transmitted from one generation to the next. It denotes historically transmitted patterns of meaning expressed in symbols. Through these symbols the people communicate, sustain and develop their knowledge and express their attitudes toward life. It has two distinctive components which can be as material and non material. Material culture consists of objects that are related to the material aspects of life which includes dress, food and household goods. Non-material culture mentions ideas, ideals, thoughts and beliefs. Culture mainly comprises of the customs, traditions, festivals, way of living and one's perspective on various issues of life. It varies from place to place and from country to

country. Culture is closely linked with life and gives meaning and also a way to lead lives. Human beings are the creators of culture and it is culture which makes us human. Many indigenous cultures in Canada are deeply rooted in oral tradition. Mi'kmaq community is one of the indigenous community of Canada and the poet Rita Joe belongs to the Mi'kmaq community.

Rita Joe was a poet, a story teller, a warrior for Mi'kmaq dignity and women's rights. She was born on 15 March 1932 in Whycocomagh, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia in a native community rich in tradition and scared by colonialism. Rita's parents were Joseph and Anne. Her mother died when Rita was five years and from then she lived in foster homes. Writing helped her to make sense and she wrote her first poem on a scrap of paper when she was seven. When she was twelve, she was frightened by the alcohol abuse around her, so she wrote to an Indian agent and asked to be placed in Shubenacadie Residential School. According to her the school looks like a castle. But inside the school, the students were allowed to speak and learn only in English. They were forbidden to speak their own Mi'kmaq language. Joe remained at the school for four years and then she headed to Halifax and enjoyed her freedom by working in the Halifax Infirmary in 1948. Rita moved forward with determination and worked hard and learned from her losses. According to Rita Joe, writing was her therapy. It became her tool to teach and heal others. She began writing for the 'Micmac News' in 1969. It started with one poem about Eskasoni titled "Here and There in Eskasoni" and evolved into a monthly column." She used to talk to the elders in the community and scribble down their stories. Her writings gained a stream of feedback, some negative but most of it is uplifting. The more she writes, the more confident she grew. The colonisers gave a mystical appearance about her Micmac community and her own people. In one of her poem she describes, "I am the Indian / And the burden / Lies yet with me" (*Song of Rita Joe*, 117). In these lines, the poet expresses her grief that the burden of wrong notions about her community and culture disturbs her. She is so proud of being an Indian and she wishes to be that. At that time, Rita's children were experiencing negative stereotypes, biased histories, belittlement and discrimination. She listened to their stories and read their textbooks and so decided to rewrite history with strong determination. She wanted to make the world know who they are and what they are capable of. She wished to make the universe know of her

unfamiliar community to the familiar world only then the world will look into her people with astonishment.

Mi'kmaq is indigenous people among the original inhabitants in the Atlantic provinces of Canada. They are the first nation people of the North – eastern woodlands. The tribal territory included Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, the north shore of New Brunswick, eastern Maine, and part of Newfoundland. Mi'kmaq is among the first people in North America to interact with European explorers, fishermen and traders. One of her poem goes on as:

I know we are different
Though we try to be like you
We live in the world of make-believe
In the field or forest, desk (or) loom
We live in your world of speed and roar,
Of mental energy, and of tomorrow's door.
We live, not on a reservation
Or amongst our people.
We survive, at the edge of overman
Trying to do what is right
In Maine U.S.A na ni'n Nikmawa'j
I am a Micmac

(Song of Eskasoni, 21)

In these lines she expresses that they are the different people but the original ones of the country. The inhabitants are not as white people who colonised Canada who act and seem to be

the inhabitants of the community but it can never be true. The white people created a wrong belief about the indigenous people and made the world believe their ideology is true. Rita Joe wants to break this concept and wants the people to know the truth about them. She is confident and proud of her community. Though they seem to be different they are the same people as everyone and they have their own culture, traditions and beliefs which are so unique only to them. Mi'kmaq people have a seasonally patterned habitation and resource harvesting like spring and summer spent on the coast and winter island. They are seasonally nomadic. They also relied on variety of resources such as shellfish to sea mammals to land mammals for nutrition, clothing, dwellings and tools. They used timber to construct canoes, snowshoes and shelters. These people counted on their surroundings for survival and developed strong reverence for the environment and sustained them. Mi'kmaq clothing is made from the skins of animals they killed which are worn by both men and women. Mi'kmaq community uses a wide variety of tools such as spears, arrows, snares, hooks and nets for many purposes. They used to live in conical wickiups, wigwams and also in open air. Mi'kmaq has unique seasonal and habitation patterns. In one of her poems, Joe says:

Come home, come home with me

See, see me at my home

We live, we live just like you in harmony

Hello, hello, hello

I am, I am just like you

We love, we eat, we sleep, we dance and sing like you.

(Song of Eskasoni, 66)

The poet says that they are also normal people who have traditions, customs and patterns for their habitation. She adds that they also love to eat sleep and dance like everyone. She invites the readers to have a look at them only then they could understand them in detail. She also writes to her own people to stand up for the truth and tell the people about their story to the world. She

keeps on insisting that they are the ones who know about themselves and asks the people not to fear in declaring about them. She always declares her strategy in a peaceful and positive node. Though she tries to make their people know to the world, she expresses her views only on a positive note and she never argues or pricks the colonisers in a negative way. Rita Joe's words mark a trail through dark places which points the way to healing and grace.



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