Chapter VI

6. Sum Up

Canadian literature reflects the Canadian perspective on 1) nature 2) frontier life and 3) Canada’s position in the world, all three of which tie into the garrison mentality. Canada’s ethnic and cultural diversity are reflected in its literature with many of its most prominent writers focusing on ethnic life. Canadian identity is closely tied to its literature. Many Canadian novels revolve around the theme of the search for one’s identity and the need to justify one’s existence in this cosmic space. Canadian novels often deal with survival and the rugged Canadian environment in the given space.

A novelist with a firmly established reputation, both nationally and internationally, Richler has since the mid 1950s emerged as one of Canada’s most controversial and significant writers, whether in fiction or in non-fiction. His novels dramatize the dilemmas of various kinds of dispossessed or ghettoized individuals; the Jew, the artist/intellectual, the expatriate, the political, and cultural victim. Richler is an essential writer for those who would understand the existentialist nature of the isolated individual in today’s world and who apprentices constantly a fictional craft that blends the complementary elements of realism, satire, and humour.

Richler has a gift of intellectual, almost mathematical, genius. He has the ability to devise with precision, a wide range of moral enigmas, each reflecting all the rest, and the whole constituting an ethical mosaic delineating the promise and the
hazards of the law. The apprenticeships of so many Richler’s characters involve a discovery of positive directions in which they fail. The perception of the world picture of Richler represents a useful method of reaching conclusive findings about the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish consciousness in writing. He presents a holistic literary response of Canadian Jews to the tragedy of European Jewry. In all his works, Richler is confronting the real picture of a man. He states that the Canadian background need a writer to say or fix who he is and where he stands. Richler knows that unpleasant truths would not create a man. It may fail to make a man realize his follies. So, he is interested in documenting man as man in his writing as most of the serious problems are created by man. Man suffers not only from outside forces like war, persecution, famine, and ruin but also from his own despair, conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness. Man can be divided on the qualities like archetypal man, everyman, social man, natural man, return of man to natural man, and a return of man to himself. Richler accepts history as the record of man’s inhumanity to man, but not the inevitability of that inhumanity. His concern with the objective truths of history has led to the creation of a series of increasingly moral values. His novels force the readers to confront a social reality from which there is no escape for a Jew.

It is not spaces which ground identifications but places. Space becomes place by being named as the flows of power and negotiation of social relations that are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed. In Canada, Montreal is a great city, where various traditions
intermingle and react by one another. It is a city that becomes the locale of Richler’s novels for examining the fears and fascination that exist between various communities. Richler is writing from the Jewish environment of his own childhood. Living at the minimum implies a life led with no awareness of one’s self; with no individuality crystallized. Shallow relationships and conventional interactions mar life. With the result, the characters give the impression that they have no alternatives but to be in their time and place. Even the individual character is influenced and shaped only by the nature and character of the community or socio-cultural situation in which the individual is placed. It is against this background, the novels of Richler are studied. Richler’s treatment of racial hatred and discrimination and the impact of racism on the consciousness of the Canadian Jews, try to order the society of their own. However, the individual is displaced. Richler depicts his heroes as antagonists and displaced individuals.

Fragmentation, alienation, and disorder are terms often applied in defining the experience of the emerging Third World nations of the world. The central focus of modern writing in its presentation of society is too remote from the individual. It is too hostile to an individual. Individual is considered culturally or linguistically estranged. The question of identity becomes an indefinable ideal. The modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual predicament in terms of alienation or exile or quest for identity. Third world writing has the theme of an individual’s predicament in the form of rootlessness and crisis of identity.
The question of identity has long been discussed in writings as man seems to lose something precious and irreplaceable. Essentially, identity is not an experience reflecting external objects. It is given in the self experience of human subject. Identity is confined to man, his reasons, and freedom of the self in a society. Man tries to establish his own identity in the conflict ridden world. His individual conscience arises out of the plurality of roles he has to play. Further, his identity evolves out of the conflict arising from his affiliation with two different worlds and ways of life. In his search for a new meaningful identity, man is pulled into the insidious temptations of separateness and independence.

Identity has also been used to explain ethnic prejudices, mental illness, class consciousness, industrial conflict, political apathy, and extremism. It results out of a deep anguish, a sense of fundamental purposelessness of life, isolation, and despair. It depicts an isolated man fitted against a question of identity. The question of identity evolves a conflict between illusion and reality. Action is the social expression of identity. The only route of access to the identity of another is through his or her action, whether verbal or not. Since identity comprises emotions, beliefs, and attitudes, it is a prime motivator of action. Identity directs action. Action could generate identity changes. Action and identity, in time, are dialectically related.

Every action of the creative individual can be described as two-fold. One is withdrawal from real happenings by using imagination, fancy, utopian or the other similar ideas. It is primarily for the purpose of identifying himself and his place. The
other one is the return to better place than to alienate or cut off himself totally from the society. However, where the creative artist tries to establish his identity or tries to feed an awareness of the past by identifying the socio-cultural changes, it usually results in alienation or his efforts fail. This is called an alienation or auto-alienation. It gives the image of isolated man.

In Richler’s novels, the protagonists are singularly individualistic and completely self-centred and their behaviour is incompatible with the natural laws of everyday life and reality as they indulge in actions which are instinctive and seem to be irrational to the rational world. Noah’s withdrawal from the Montreal Jewish ghetto life controlled by his grandfather, Melech Adler, seems to be an irrational attempt on the part of the ghetto life, and Duddy’s desire to own a land has been taken as an attempt to cheat others. They alienate themselves from the sinister and materialistic life and try to work out their destiny in their own way. Though successful in freeing themselves from the restraints of their external environment, they remain subjected to the urges of the subconscious self—the very act of subjecting himself to the primitive urge. Noah protests against the Jewish Montreal ghetto life, Duddy wants to own a land of his own, Jake has the dream of becoming a horseman, Gursky spreads seeds everywhere to have Gursky dynasty, and so on are independent actions which result from the dictates of their ‘Id’. Richler presents the struggle of a man to establish an identity. In his fictional world, the individual is a victim of his own situations and that individual is neglected, abandoned, and put in a world of desolation and humiliation. The protagonists in his fictional world belong to an
unstable social order as the societies are on the verge of collapse. The society promotes nothing except a vaguer sense of frustration and a sense of glory dead as life’s expectations are nullified. Richler examines his protagonists’ turned to be antagonists’ frustrations, maladjustment, meaninglessness, and the sense of the void due to physical and sexual encounter with women of different nations and categories. In fact, their arduous journey has been jolted and ended abruptly due to their feeling of otherness or alienation. It makes them exist in periphery as outsiders and lone exiles. The feeling of being part of a lost generation, the compulsion to act without the ability to do so, the intense guilt at having ruined the lives of others, the impotent desire for power, for revenge, for love more than anything are common to Andre and Joshua.

Richler’s **Smaller Hero** delves deep into the psyche of the problem of dispossessed individual in displacement. He relates himself to the carving of an authentic selfhood within the psyche of his protagonist. The problem with Noah is that he is too much of an individual who does not confirm to the Jewish code of the Canadian society. Once a person experiences the difficulties of feeling uneasy with the tradition, he normally passes through the problem of identity crisis. Noah, as an exile, is caught between present and past, reality and imagination, and for the new abode and the old home. Being not at ease, he fails to find the strength or security or an identity to find footing anywhere in his own space or environment. He experiences the absurdity of his predicament. Noah’s retreat from the Montreal Jewish ghetto life and Miriam’s libidinous illustrate the yearning for the death of ‘being’ in favour of
‘becoming’ as the life becomes a paradox and a puzzle which may not be solved instantly.

Duddy rebelled against the modern society where there is no way to understand the real self of an individual and where ranks and honours value the man. Duddy internalizes the negative view of life and its freedom which is channelised into anger and at worst, abuse of behaviour and language. There is no order for him in his world and he becomes a misfit and a wanderer in search of his true self. Duddy remains an individualist untrammeled by inherited social values. Duddy may be seen as an authentic modern hero. He is primarily self-centred and unaffected in any serious way by the needs and desires of others. Duddy is engaged in the romantic quest of the individual hero; either for worldly success or for self-realization. He is driven by an instinct to be rebellious, individualistic, and iconoclastic.

Joshua describes the world which is basically not unified. The world in which he grows up, which he explores, and in which he eventually finds a niche is like a jungle where each individual is out for himself, where there are no accepted rules of conduct. It is a fragmented society. Joshua and Pauline have created a tranquil garden in it.

The quest for identity amidst social transition is what Richler sets out to explore in his novels like Smaller Hero. He insists that change is the complex motif. He views change as positive since it is through change his protagonists break out of their inherited identity. Changes give them an identity to their fleeing self by
emancipating them from the stifled authoritarian order. They are strangers to themselves and remain unhoused by their desire to be somebody at somewhere. As observers from the margins, they are in search of their center which is neither here nor anywhere. Being alienated from society, they become passive spectators who only see but never feel. They live without a stable social identity. They live because life has to be lived. In the case of Noah and Duddy, it is natural and instinctive to be identified with archetypal longing.

In fact, theirs (the protagonists) is comparatively a drama of spiritual stress and strain. They uniformly strive to be loners in the world of their own. They are the archetypal examples to prove that the modern age is an age of alienation. The potential meaninglessness of human existence has corroded their lives from various quarters. In Solomon, Berges is an outsider, a man of admirable moral sensitivity and vulnerable self doubt. But, he is also a self destructive alcoholic having thrown away his early promise as a literary prodigy to spite a father he considers a sellout.

Richler’s protagonists run a frenzied race away from origins towards elusive goals, while other characters meet with accidents that may cause temporary or permanent paralysis. Duddy in Duddy, Bennett in Acrobats respectively run away from their origins by undertaking a quest for their artistic selves. Duddy becomes a film maker in Duddy and Bennett becomes a painter in the Kunstleroman of Acrobats. Noah’s going out goes beyond the humanistic perception that man is neither an end nor a beginning but is constantly outside of himself. Noah has pursued
the transcendental goal to go beyond the meaning of Jewish Montreal ghetto as an enclosure of an individual soul to exist in the world of confusion. In such a way, Noah’s transcendence or passing beyond subjectivity is in the sense that human beings are not closed in on themselves but are always present in the universe. He rejects universal love in the sense that there can be no personal relationship between an individual human being and the abstraction called humanity. The craving of the soul is freedom which is dangerous and risky to exist but there is no dignity in being human without freedom. Noah’s craving for freedom failed him to re-negotiate his nature with new forms, new idioms, and new perceptions.

Richler consequently explores the consciousness of his isolated heroes who while they seek order also search for that order within the private recesses of their own minds. In fact, they teach the readers about the relationship between man and his society. His men live the quietly tragic lives of poverty and loneliness. These men are poor because they are psychologically conditioned to see themselves as victims of fate. Richler points out in Duddy that Jews are not allowed to own land. Their suffering is a meaningful one. It is a quest for moral resolution and self-realisation. It becomes a historical reality. In Richler’s Duddy, there is old generational conflict of an immigrant and the acculturating young. It also deals with the consciousness of ethnicity as the younger acculturated Jews feel caught between the opposing, threatening French majority and the rejecting dominant Anglo-Saxon elite while identifying with American culture and with the comparatively more integrated American Jewry. The oscillation between two extremes of reality and dream can
result in alienation. The concept of alienation is not quite new. It has been in use in theological, philosophical, sociological, and psychological writings for a long time. It is an estrangement of an individual from one another due to lack of communication and mutual understanding.

Alienation is man’s dehumanization, his loss of independence, and his estrangement from other fellows. Alienation of an individual reinforces loneliness, inertia, helplessness, and abandonment. It is accentuated further by withdrawal from the society. Loneliness has a metaphysical implication. Richler’s heroes are lonely in the crowd. They know this paradoxical loneliness which emphasizes the irredeemable situation which can be resolved through a deeper understanding of the ethics of life. Noah in Smaller Hero feels lonely and claustrophobic even when he is surrounded by people whose lives are empty. He is in search of a human world of emotional fullness, a world of meaningful relatedness which he cannot find either in his place or in other places. He comprehends universal entropy. He is left to himself. He is alone in the world.

The expatriate individual lives in permanent exile, cut off from tradition, uprooted in time and place, fragmented and twisted as a person. Richler’s novels draw a poignant account of the fate of displaced and transitional or marginal individuals who have been rendered homeless, both at home and abroad, and doomed to a savourless, and asocial existence. Richler for many years lived as an exile in London, mocking Canadian identity which is similar to the multiple marginality of many ethnic
writers who have sought to resolve their problems of identification through cosmopolitan success within a neutral or less emotionally charged larger space where success would mean a kind of acceptance and possible genuine assimilation through recognition of talent.

Richler’s ironic detachment and his contrary awareness enable him to be a chronicler of the racial and tribal experience and a delineator of human character with great insight into the tragedy and the grim inevitability of fate. In Richler’s novels, there has been an increasing sense of displacement, abandonment, and denial of hope. His protagonists wander through alien geographies being rootless and overpowered by the need to discover their individuality and identity. In their search, they realize that their spaces are on the verge of collapse as in no way capable of offering a sense of comfort or solace to these weary individuals. It is due to the colossal experiment of the British Empire in Canada which had made entire culture on the move, physically displaced, physically bewildered, and condemned to the worst kind of spiritual privation as seen in Andre, Noah, Duddy Jake, Gursky, and Barney. They are made to feel homesick and nostalgia for a non-existent past without ever having had a home. It is an environment in which the very boundaries of identity begins to collapse. Smaller Hero vividly recreates the Montreal community of Richler’s youth and provides a penetrating study of the growth of a sensitive, intense, Jewish youth, Noah, in his environment.
Noah is also exposed from the rigorous order of Montreal Jewish ghetto to the order of exposure outside the ghetto life with Miriam, the sensual world of existence which nullifies the expectation of the craving of the soul for truth and wisdom. Contrary to his effort, he has been exposed to physical and spiritual humiliation. The humiliation with Noah starts with the incidents at the coalyard and later with Miriam. In fact, his baracoon is a suffocating, a coarse-grained, chaotic, overcrowded, and a fading one. His world is a world of illusion. Similarly, in Duddy too, there is clearly something basically wrong with the values of community which Duddy so enthusiastically accepts as his own. The world that Duddy knows is a world of men and women without any sustaining relationship among them. Duddy’s experience is so dominated by the patterns of life that when he does finally meet a woman who stands apart from it, Yvette, he is simply unable to comprehend her true nature, to see her for what she is.

Enemies depicts the London of North American writers and directors who fled to England to escape McCarthy’s witch-hunts in Hollywood. The novel is marked by the protagonist’s rejection of politics as the solution to man’s problems and his inability to establish what should be sanctioned or censured. There are three but separate spheres in the novel: the domestic and social, the racial and ethnical, and the professional and artistic. In the first sphere, the Horseman is a false god, advocating dubious values; in the second he is, when considered within the cyclical pattern of Jake’s dreams and nightmares, a part of sheep to the slaughterhouse and in the third, the Horseman represents the artist’s desire for participation which is constantly in
conflict with his inherent role as an observer. To the Hershes, Jake appears as the unrepentant apostate, brusquely slapping aside uncle Abe’s plea to look inside his heart and see yiddiskkeit. But they know nothing of his struggle-the struggle of a provincial boy who has renounced the law only to clinging stubbornly to the essence of his culture. Morality is very much at the heart of Version too. In many ways, it’s Richler’s most affecting work, at heart a love story. Panofksy can be ingratiating and funny and exasperating, but he is essentially a tragic figure.

Religion is a fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a group of people. These set of beliefs concern the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe and involve people. They also often contain a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs. Ever since the world began, man has demonstrated a natural inclination towards faith and worship of anything he considered superior / difficult to understand. His religion consisted of trying to appease and get favors from the supreme being he feared. This resulted in performing rituals and keeping traditions or laws to earn goodness and everlasting life. Richler is scrupulous in rendering the motives of his little heroes in a care-little, do-nothing and failure oriented society, the Montreal Jewish ghetto. He has exposed his heroes into two kinds of order. One is the order of enclosure which is entrapping, cloying, and overwhelming – the ghetto’s life that threatens to absorb their characters and sap their individuality. The other one is the order of exposure which is based on their yearning to free themselves from the easy entrapment of the ghetto’s life to go into the world outside the ghetto despite their insecurity and hardships with no fear and trembling
that come from too much choice and too little chance of success. They become passive rebels with much consciousness and commitment. Entrapment and habit alone could only thwart them further. Freedom and flux might create them anew. Noah believes that he can turn himself into a real human being by refusing to take part in the conspiracy of evasion. He voluntarily becomes an outsider. For Melech, he is finished, a candidate for God’s punishment. Cocksure deals with the sad decline of spiritual values and moral responsibility in the contemporary society. Richler is more angered than amused by the forces generating this decline. Consequently, his novels lend themselves to vitriolic satire.

Richler voices the concerns of the alienated and uncovers the deep undercurrent of the agony of an individual psyche. His protagonists suffer from uprootedness, cynicism, evils of materialism, loss of faith in life and religion, and identity crisis. The yearning for home, for roots, and stability is deeply embedded in the human psyche of his protagonists. He turns his attention to the lost individuals who happen to live in the half-made society which is crippled by the borrowed culture, mimicry, and parasites. And as a result, Richler finds himself disinherit from his tradition. In his analysis, fragmentation, both at the microcosmic level of the individual and at the macrocosmic level of the society, acts as the major deterrent to progress in his colonized world, Canada.

The present dissertation has concentrated on the serious heads like space, configuration of environment, identity, religious overtones and themes like isolation,
alienation, and exile. It also deals with some thematic heads like colonialism, individuality, society, and cultural confrontation with individual frustration at life and religion. So, it is evident that Richler is a serious writer and he makes references to biblical characters too.

Richler’s Andre Bennett of Acrobats is comparable to Jimmy Porter of Osborne’s Look Back in Anger. Acrobats has echoes from Marlraux (L’Espoir) and Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises and even from James Joyce and Dos Pasos. Richler’s Smaller Hero is comparable to Graham Greene’s Earth and High Heaven on the problem of Jewish-Gentile relationships. It is also comparable to Hugh Machennon’s Two Solitudes on the problem of the need for unity among Canadians. Further, it is also understood that Smaller Hero is comparable to Arun Joshi’s The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and Foreigner and Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter on the basis of the treatment of sexuality in these novels.

However, it is to be accepted that Richler remains a genius in his stand to portray a hard core reality of human values in Jewish Montreal ghetto, Canada, by concentrating on space, environment, identity, and religion in his Oeuvre.