Preface

History, as told from the dominant perspective, accentuates the triumphs of the privileged and tends to downplay the very presence of the periphery. It is therefore possible for every single recorded event of history to have an alternate version, which would highlight significant omissions exposing the inequalities and injustices inherent in the established system. This will also bring to the fore the role of such omissions in shaping the character of communities, individuals and the nature of the present itself. This gross neglect adequately explains the ardour with which socially marginalised sections of humanity such as the Jewish Canadians cling to their past. They retain a vivid though untold account of history which is relived and revived through individual and collective memories as handed down from generation to generation.

History has been the greatest formative influence on the Jewish consciousness: memories of the bitter exactions levied upon the race by an oppressive social order have been woven into their imagination and intellect. It is history that Jewish Canadian authors rewrite, and in doing so, they rewrite themselves. For the Jewish Canadian writers in general, writing is an act of re-affirming the truth about history.
In his own inimitable way, Mordecai Richler underscores the necessity of reclaiming the “true” history of the Jewish diaspora in Canada. Towards this end, Richler explores the vast repertoire of myth as well as narrative strategies which include the use of black humour, biblical allusions, Holocaust, physical as well as psychological quests, symbolisms, motifs, and sagas of outlaws. The relationship between the individual and the community, traced in his novels, is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities. On the one hand, the necessity of being in society is emphasised; on the other estrangement is justified. The complexity of the situation calls for an analysis of the socio-economic and cultural factors that condition the existence of the individual within the society, of the elements that render the system oppressive and necessitate estrangement.

Considering the inevitability of a confrontation between the system built upon obsolete codes and values and the new generation that has internalised a new set of rules, a restructuring, if not a reversal, of social relations become inevitable.

Richler’s writings presuppose the reader as an active presence, recreating his works and meanings and resolving its ambiguities. Rather than through any authorial implication of its possible presence, beneath the fragmented Jewish world, he is invited to read a story that
is deliberately left untold but acquires prominence by its very absence from the page. The poignant omissions, muted warnings and comments, suspiciously casual silences and gaps in narration and character delineation, make up an interesting subtext which Richler lets his reader make what he will. Sometimes his ironic silence gives the lie to the uttered works that seem to approve or disapprove of a situation. And in between the words themselves are spaces that may be filled up to create entirely new patterns of signification.

A sense of equipoise is conveyed through the tension between conformity and non-conformity, morality and immorality, law and lawlessness, active resistance and passive sufferings. Consequently, traditionally recommended positions appear totally out of place. For the Canadian Jews, their peculiar historical experiences, their existential precariousness, and the resultant mental, emotional and physical stress have been such as to necessitate and justify subversive reactions to ethical questions. Richler's depiction of the life of Jews problematizes quite a number of political, social and ethical concepts. The main characters of Richler's fiction are keenly aware of the arbitrariness of the social and moral codes that govern them and make up and manipulate their own rules as they go along.
Richler's fiction brings to focus erring individuals who veer off the beaten track and fight the community's attempts at bringing them back to the submissive herd. Richler re-works and re-tells familiar Jewish and Biblical myths to validate the complex and sometimes contradictory perspectives of his characters who are often in the quest for the self. Though determined by its immediate historical context, the quest transcends historical moments, being at the fundamental level the quest for the self. But the self, which proliferates in all directions, is the most problematic of terms. It cloaks itself in manifold disguises, and creates a multitude of images to fascinate or deceive the seeker. The present study examines Richler's works as representative of a Jewish consciousness that seeks to come to terms with the self. The work also tries to highlight the features that set him apart as a writer who uses myths as a narrative strategy to expose the predicament of the modern Jew.

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, "Myth and Contemporaneity," myth is examined as the medium for the articulation of myriad experiences in the contemporary world. Icons of myth are drawn not only from our individual postnatal experiences, but from the complexly coded racial memories which reach back almost to infinity, and which, in some mysterious way, stretch even into the future. In
this respect, myth assumes significance since it is the primary ground on which we articulate our experiences in our social and natural environment.

Richler views both God’s universe and his own with irony. In fact he compares the two worlds when he interweaves six of his novels with stories from the Bible. The second chapter discusses the Biblical elements in Richler’s novels. In his first novel, *The Acrobats*, Richler tells the story of a sensitive, suffering young man “adopted” by a couple named Pepe and Maria (Spanish for Joseph and Mary), and “executed” at the climactic moment of a festival devoted to sacrifice for sins. In *Son of a Smaller Hero*, Noah Adler, like his Biblical namesake, sails away to a new life while the people he leaves behind are destroyed. It is a retelling of this story that explores the need for righteous men to survive in an unrighteous world.

Richler presents a world bereft of conflict, contrast and calamity. He is quite aware of the challenges of real life and its inherent pitfalls. So his characters have their foibles as well as their strengths. In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy proves himself a giant killer when he takes on Dingleman and wins. We applaud Duddy’s abilities even as we deplore the hardheartedness on which his success depends. Joshua, like his Biblical ancestor, triumphs over his
adversaries and claims for himself and his tribe of Shapiros their rightful share of the Promised Land. *Solomon Gursky was Here* is a parody of the history of the House of Israel. In this novel, Richler rewrites the Book of Moses to portray an unexpected version of what happened to one of the ten lost tribes.

The third chapter, “Persecution and Displacement,” focuses on the psychological and ideological implications of the Holocaust in the writings of Richler. It portrays the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the political and social reality of the post-Holocaust world. In some of Richler's novels, there is a blurring of boundaries between the victim and the victimizer. The so-called “victim” dons the garb of the “victimizer” and the supposed “victimizer” is reduced to the role of the hapless “victim”. In Richler's presentation of the post-war world, the brutal abuse of justice by the oppressor breeds more injustice in the victims. In his turn, the victim frantically strives to become the master through brutal mistreatment of his own kind. A causal chain of terror and victimization is established and underlies the continuity of experience of the marginalized Jewish population.

Richler uses different artistic modes like black humour, scatological humor and irony as narrative techniques to explore the complexity of existence. These narrative techniques are to be
explored in Chapter Four entitled “Dark Blossoms: Carnival and Humor as Resilience”. Incidents in the present are repeatedly made to trigger memories which set in motion several storylines in the past. It facilitates an interpolation of the incidental vignettes, situations and anecdotes that structure the novels in a frame of mythical and contemporary storylines. At the same time, they give the illusion of depth, implicitly suggesting the emergence of a significant pattern.

Perhaps the most striking phenomenon in recent Canadian writing has been the flirtations with magical realism and historiographic metafiction. There is also an increasing tendency to lose verisimilitude for fantasy and to abandon the chronological pattern of ordered sequence. Richler extols the disruption of the traditional narrative with anecdotes, flashbacks, flash-forwards and asides. Such a potpourri cheerfully flouts the conventional novel’s laws of form and leaves an impression of exuberant and chaotic fullness. The final chapter, “Many Faces of Truth: History as Interpretation,” examines the structural complexity of Richler’s novels. The layering of texts and sub-texts within a mythical framework reiterates Richler’s rootedness in his cultural and social identity.