



Multiculturalism in Mordecai Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero*

J. P. Kamble, Assistant Professor, K. N. P. College Walwa

Abstract: One of the characteristics of Richler's hero is that he reacts against injustice. Along with the main characters, the minor characters also express multicultural stand. The multiculturalism favors the freedom of everyone. Richler's characters become nervous and angry, if they are unable to get it. Unable to bear the hypocritical ruling nature of his grandfather, Noah sets out to find his own identity, and for which, he knows, flexibility and tolerance are essential. Flexibility and tolerance are the significant aspects of multicultural relationship. Through Noah's character Richler communicates that rigidity should be replaced by flexibility and censure by tolerance.

In *Son of a Smaller Hero* Mordecai Richler, the prominent Canadian novelist, delineates the real picture of Jewish community set in Montreal and depicts a fairly realistic story of a rebellious and rather self-centered hero. The novel portrays the journey and growth of the protagonist, Noah Adler who struggles to escape the restrictive identity that his ethnic community places on him. His family's strife and the structures of socio-religious milieu force him to leave the house in search of freedom in the multicultural environment in the Gentile world.

Noah's attachment to his grandfather, Melech continues for years but the incident of hiding two scrap sacks their old customer, Mr. Mooreby Noah's father- Wolf, changes his life. He is shocked to witness the deceptive nature of his grandfather. His disclosure of the fact of stealing two scraps sacks to Melech wins him slaps rather than reprimand to his father. His expectation of punishment to his father turns into in vain. On the other hand, Noah's revealing the truth wins him penalty that leads him to detest the hypocritical grandfather and ultimately forces him to escape from the house. Noah feels insulted the way his grandfather whacks him for displaying the truth and feels trapped by his ghetto's

upbringing. He belongs to a family controlled by his grandfather Melech Adler whose duplicitous surveillance of the Jewish law turns Noah away from Judaism. Melech says, 'I am the boss. First, last and always (19). Noah leaves the family and decides to drive a cab and attend university. His paring away is a retort in contradiction of rigidity in religion. He does not have the freedom to speak out the truth. The narrator indirectly criticizes Melech and his hypocritical superiority and defends Noah for his stand to have freedom. Melech's wife, Jenny's suggestion to Melech not to dominate but love everyone in the family and understand their feelings is a mild reaction against his superiority and rigidity. Noah reacts openly and strongly to his way of hypocrisy. His escape serves double purpose; first Noah enters into a Gentile world outside, and secondly it indirectly punishes the family, particularly the grandfather for his erroneous behavior by flouting away from Jewish rigidity.

Richler, through Noah, promotes the freedom and respect of an individual which is called liberal multiculturalism. The intra-cultural relationship, Richler demonstrates, leads to multicultural encounter. For Noah, love that bears respect is substantial. Freedom, love, and respect, which Noah advocates, are the assets of multiculturalism. Without love, he says, life is incomplete. The cross cultural relation, that the novel depicts, is the secret, confidential love affair of Melech Adler and his Gentile beloved, Helga Kubalski. Though, he cannot accept the bond with Gentile beloved and the child publicly, however he does aid her sending money orders regularly. Noah finds the secret papers related to Melech-Helga story in the Torah box which is supposed to be very pious and religious one.

Melech's hypocritical rigidity does not allow Ida, his daughter to disclose her love affair with Stanley who belongs to an unorthodox family. Her fear of her father forces her to see Stanley secretly. Noah's father, Wolf Adler's comment confirms Melech's rigid nature. 'You can go without a hat. Eat ham. But not in front of Zeyda' (102). Noah's concealing the secret reveals his love and devotion for his grandfather as well as his family. He does not want to shatter the name of grandfather in the community. Through Noah's condemnation of fake popularity and respect in the name of religion, Richler expects to accept the multicultural stand openly. The main characters suffer because of the fear to protect their rights. One of the brightest examples is Melech. His feeling guilty about

his Polish girlfriend whom he misses all his life is his step towards multiculturalism, but his fault is he does not take open stand.

The funeral of Wolf Adler, who dies in a fire mishap, with rituals and customs of Jewish community represents the ethnic liberty that Jews enjoy in Canada. The thousands of people of hybrid ethnicity attend the ceremony to pay homage to a Jew. Itzik and others expect Noah to follow Jewish culture. “You are not supposed to shave . . . you are not supposed to exchange greeting . . . Do you know how to say Kaddish at least (129,130)? Kaddish is the prayer for the dead in Jewish community. Wolf’s death for Torah—the law of God as revealed to Moses in Judaism—is appreciated by many, and everybody is asked to follow the example of Wolf Adler. He is made hero as he dies for Judaism. “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are judgment: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right he is” (141). Many pay homage to him. “May the Almighty comfort you together with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, a man yelled ‘Amen’ yelled many others (142). The funeral ceremony ends with Rabbi Milton Fishman reading the special prayers on the steps of synagogue. The real facts, however, of Wolf Adler’s death are shocking. The box, on which Wolf had kept his hand during the fire mishap, contains Melech’s papers of secret love affair with Gentile lady, Helga. Wolf, who believes his father ideally religious and respected, dies to save the pious box of Torah at the yard which was set on fire by Shloime, Melech’s son, as a reaction against Melech’s strict and hypocritical nature.

The President of the committee for Better Relations between Gentiles and Jews also attend the funeral function, and he hopes to organize Wolf Adler Memorial Fund for the better future of Jews. He says, “There are three sides to every argument. Yours. The other guys. And the right side” (140). The Canadian government has encouraged such organizations to collect funds adding government’s contribution for the enhancement of minorities and marginalized as the part of multicultural policy. Noah’s escape provides himself to settle at the place, Dorchester Street- a block away from St. Catherine Street; where people of all ethnicity live together. His healthy relations with the neighbors of different ethnic identities elucidate his multicultural approach. Noah gets an opportunity to see Theo Hall, the young professor of English literature at Wellington College where he joins evening English classes.

Theo could have easily got a job at a big American university, but his decision to stay in Canada explicates his devotion for the improvement of

minorities. Miriam, his wife, supports, understands and respects him for his work. Their filial life seems an ideal example for others. The couple, on Theo's part, looks inseparable. 'Her body was a habit, a comfort, to him and he found it difficult to sleep without her' (44). The multicultural ideology which provides peace of mind for both, speaks of love for each other. In the broader sense of the term, multiculturalism explicit the respect of husband and wife for each other.

Theo Hall, the Anglo-English professor is impressed to see Noah in the evening literature classes in a college, and offers him to work in the college library and to correct papers for the English Department. The multicultural encounter with the Anglo-English professor provides path to Jewish Noah. Theo seems as if he is one of the spokespersons of hybrid ethnicity. Despite the fact that Noah is a Jewish boy, he determines to aid him. Theo's humanitarian attitude brings Noah to the house of Christianity. Miriam, Theo's wife, also welcomes Noah in her apartment. The Hall family's attempt exposes the decline of anti-Semitic feelings, as referred in the novel, 'that anti-Semitism was on the decline in Canada and that the Jews joined with the great prime minister of this great country in the great fight against communism (11).

The encounter between Noah, a Jew and Miriam, a Gentile is an awkward love affair, as Miriam is already married and ten years older than Noah. Nevertheless, this seems a passionate love story for time being. Although Theo, her husband convinces her that his earnings are quite comfortable to bear a child, she keeps mum. It is her negative response that he understands and allows her to lead life as she wants. The conflict between Miriam and Theo is basically filial one, its intensity increases by Noah's entrance in the family. She knows that Theo is so calm and quiet and he would not do anything against her. In this regard Ada Craniford rightly points out in *Life in Ten Novels*:

Although Noah's behavior in taking Theo's wife may not be what one would expect from a righteous man, Richler never says that Noah is perfect. His responsibility for the affair is mitigated by his youth and by the older Miriam's obvious dissatisfaction with her husband. She also painted as promiscuous before her marriage and even more desperately intemperate when she goes back to Theo after Noah leaves. In fact she is shown as drowning in debauchery, her scandalous behavior meticulously clocked by Theo's mother who sits outside her son's bedroom door where a

drunken Miriam entertains one lover after another. Why does not Theo do something about his wife's behavior? The answer is that he cannot. He can neither help her nor discipline her because he has no power at all: neither for good nor for evil. (32, 33)

Miriam, however, comes to know that it is very difficult to live with Noah who is ten years younger than her. Noah's family does not approve his living with Miriam. He also feels awkward to continue the relationship. Noah's short lived love-story continues as far as he goes in that direction. Miriam's rejection of Noah's marriage proposal, which he offers feeling the personal moral burden, actually releases and relaxes Noah. Miriam, sensing the failure of it in future, discards conscious but unwilling marriage proposal of Noah which juxtaposes his expression of love in drunkard condition.

With her emotional attachment Noah's mother, Leah tries to bring him back to home and particularly from Miriam. She counts her worst days in the critical condition with the purpose of expectation of Noah to realize his responsibility towards his family. She does not want her son to live away from her and family. At last she succeeds in convincing him to stay at home. He observes her hair is graying, her cheeks are hollow, and her eyes have turned red and lacks the former vitality. Noah says 'Your father used to say do not make a woman weep. God counts her tears. Come, get dressed. I'll take you for a walk' (89). The family bond brings him back for certain period of time. As a righteous son, he takes care of his mother, takes her out for walk and has good conversation with her.

The funds, donations for the improvement of people belonging to poor community are other aspects of multicultural policy. Melech, though rigid with others, pays for the planting of orange trees in Israel, the certificate proclaims "Melech Adler and Family" (57). An Israeli flag behind his desk again shows liberty that Jews enjoy in Canada.

Noah's respect for the feelings of others is the recognition of them. Being himself an atheist he does not pressurize others to be atheist. He, on the contrary, respects those who believe God. The narrator describes him:

He began to understand that God had been created by man out of necessity. No God, no ethic: no ethic freedom. Freedom was too much for man. I was wrong to worry about God, he thought. 'I don't believe in him, so he does not exist. My grandfather believes in Him, so He does exist'. (60)

Noah does not feel inferior belonging to a Jewish community. It is Miriam's attempt to make him comfortable and feel equal as other men are. To a question asked by Miriam whether he worries about being a Jew, his answer is, 'No, I don't. The guy who wants to get into a restricted golf course or hotel and the other guy who won't let him in are really brothers. The fact that one is inside and other the outside is an accident. They could switch places just like that'. (66)He explains his attitude towards those people who are burned in Germany. He says, 'The important thing is not that they burned Jews but they burned men' (66).

Richler speaks of communication between the French Canadians and Presbyterians. He also articulates his attitude to those who are bilingual as thing of beauty. As multiculturalism means business, it benefits the people of various categories and accepts positives and negatives of each other.

The French Canadians tolerate the Presbyterians from the city because they have brought prosperity to their village, and the Presbyterians find that the French Canadians add spice to their holiday: they accept their haughtiness as philosophically as rain on Sunday. Few on either side are bilingual. (109)

Jewish Canadians' contribution for the development of Canada as nation is taken into consideration. The Canadian government knows it very well that to improve social, political and other sectors of life, equal opportunities to all and appreciation of minority groups are the needs of time; and as the part of multicultural policy the recognition is essential to all especially to marginalized groups like Jews. For upbringing of Jews and such groups, the personalities like Theo Hall come forward keeping aside ethnic discrimination. The God treats all equal. Theo, which means God in Greek (2005:29), makes no difference between Christens and Jews.

As pointed out earlier, the multicultural policy offers complete freedom to minorities and marginalized people like Jews in Canada to maintain and celebrate the rituals and customs of Jewish ethnicity. The speaker from Israel arrives to guide Jews in Montreal.

Look at me and think: How much can I do for Israel? I will tell you how much. Not enough. Do you know why? Because you are Jews, and that's a crime in this world. . . For the first time in two thousand years we are being given the chance to die like men. Only the ones who pray well stay home. Do you know them? The ones who pray. . . . If the Germans murder a thousand they go to

a synagogue. If the Germans murder two thousand they hold a special service. If the Germans murder ten thousand they pray all day and all night. (22)

The speaker's frank expression displays Canadian government's free multicultural policy. He alerts them of their insult and inspires them to lead the life of human beings. Responding to his call, all comrades join hand in hand and perform folk-dance shouting "Israel lives! Israel lives! Israel lives!"(24) The minorities do feel proud and honored in the celebration of folk-dancing which is nothing but commemoration of multicultural ideology.

The multicultural Canada provides opportunities to many to improve their social and financial condition. The minorities are considered equal to strong like French and English Canadians. Many immigrants settled in Canada, improved themselves and helped to the improvement of Canada as nation. Nearly everyone is welcomed in Canada, and above all is co-operated to settle quite comfortably with financial and ethnic securities with various work opportunities. Debrofsky says, 'I came to Canada with fifty cents in my pocket . . . and I worked hard' (193). Melech Adler also says that how Canada helped him to settle in the life. The immigrants' ethnicity does not come in the way of improvement as barrier. This gave confidence to minorities to be safe in Canada. Wolf Adler keeps an Israeli flag behind his desk. Melech and family donate plants of orange tree in Israel. Many talk about equality of man.

Bhikhu Parekh points out that multiculturalism does not deal only with different cultures but also with the internal division of a culture respecting each other. Rigidity creates many problems. Melech's rigid nature leads him to restlessness as Noah, Shloime and Ida leave him. Shloime fires his father's yard and does not attend funeral of Wolf Adler.

The tourist hotels having American flag speaks of liberty of their own with respected greetings. The words on the sign board essentially reflect the Canadian government's policy of multiculturalism to welcome the neighbour. The sign says:

WELCOME NEIGHBOUR
JOHNNY CAUCK GREETES YOU
U.S. Money Accepted at Par. (21)

Noah firmly says, 'If I wanna drink, I drink. This is a free country' (22). It is the nation that offers freedom to every individual. The concept

of multiculturalism begins from freedom of every individual. His anger, 'Don't say nigger. Noah wouldn't like it' (27), against those who insult blacks is the recognition of blacks' existence.

Ray Smith, who gives afterword to 1989 edition of *A Choice of Enemies*, discusses novel's various aspects. He points out, 'Richler's love and respect for the ghetto are evident, but his satire is even more obvious, for he has never shirked from telling the truth. For every Zaddik, there are many saying this, Richler would certainly to be criticized by the inhabitants' (205). In all those, who observed novel indifferently, appreciate the work. Richler, no doubt, makes fun of some of Jewish traditions, but it is a satire on what is wrong in the society. He has no intension to insult or harm anyone. Jackie Moore gives her observations of the novel objecting sloppy writing and carelessness, and thinks the book as anti-Semitic. She puts it like this to Richler:

You have failed to put across the emotional life of your characters, all of whom were so unpleasant and shifty – that is, conforming to prejudices. I think real reason for book's weakness is your own hatred and contempt in fact, you say, the Jews stink, the Gentile stink; Montreal stinks; Canada stinks. The end result is an all-pervasive stink. (Foran 197)

When Richler says Jews, Gentile, Montreal and Canada that everything stinks, he talks of equal quality of all of them. In other words Jews and Gentiles are not different but same.

Marg, Miriam's friend comes to comprise between Miriam and Theo. She makes her aware of dreadful Jewish tradition so that she should leave Noah. This shows her anti-Semitic feelings. She explains her experience. David Shub, the man who was to marry Marg, marries a girl of Jewish community. She expresses her hatred towards Jews and their food.

The multicultural policy declared by Canadian government properly aids the minorities in Canada. To maintain the balance in various communities, the weak societies are being aided. Therefore to help needy becomes the national policy matter. Noah refers his friend, 'Harry Goldenberg felt that St. Lawrence Street Jews should be helped like the undeveloped countries (176). The comment is enough to understand feeling of support to the minorities.

The multicultural ideology allows everyone to cultivate religious beliefs and develop sacred building. The congregation is established to build a synagogue, a school and community centre on Maplewood Avenue.

The discussion between Max Adler, the president of the congregation and Jack Goldfarb, the vice president using the basement of the old synagogue for their building campaign headquarters expresses the improving outlook of the Jewish community.

In 1939 a representative of the Hebrew Book Centre had arrived from Tel Aviv and had made an eloquent speech about the pioneers in Palestine. He told the congregation that the Hebrew had been rejuvenated by these men, and that it was the duty of Jews everywhere to read their books, for, at the same time, they would be acquiring culture and helping in the noblest cause. (184)

Along with the main characters, the minor characters also express multicultural stand. Howard expresses, 'I like Canadians and human beings too' (190). The comment speaks of the universality in all human beings. The multiculturalism favors the freedom of everyone. They become nervous and angry, if they are unable to get it. Same is the Noah's anger. 'Can't I have privacy in my own room even? Spying on me, eh? I'm going and I'm glad. What are you looking? Did you ever let me do what I want? Once. Ever ask me how I felt? I'm going and I'm glad, you hear?' (197)

The Jews follow their tradition with pride. They feel devoted to it.

During Shivah, a Hebrew term that means seven days of mourning, a light is kept burning in the house in the memory of soul of the departed. It is customary for the mourners – parents, brothers and sisters, wife and children – to wear dark preferably black garment. Marital relations are forbidden. They sit on low stools and chairs and wear cloth slippers and sandals. All the mirrors in the house are covered and the men don't shave. (152)

The story ends as it begins. Noah leaves home, this time for Europe. He leaves behind his ailing, grasping mother and his lonely, isolated grandfather. He turns his back on his restrictive ethnic community. The search for self continues, but it is a search permeated with ambivalence. He finds that he cannot affirm his identity apart from community, family, and place. His confusion and torment stem from his problem that he can neither embrace nor finally reject community, family, or place. He chooses to escape them for the time being, but his search for an independent identity leads finally to a sense of futility.

REFERENCE:

1. Richler, Mordecai. *Son of a Smaller Hero*. London: Andre Deutsch. 1995
2. Craniford, Ada. *Life in Ten Novels*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press. 1992.
3. Deb, Kushal. Ed. *Mapping Multiculturalism*. Jaipur: Rawat publication. 2002.
4. Khadpekar, N. R. *Understanding Multiculturalism*. Tripura: IUP. 2008.
5. Posner, Michael. *The Last Honest Man: Mordecai Richler An Oral Biography*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. 2004.