

IDENTITY CRISIS IN MORDECAI RICHLER'S NOVEL SOLOMON GURSKY WAS HERE

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ABSTRACT:

Mordecai Richler, a Montreal born Canadian Jewish writer is a popular figure in Canadian Literature. He has rejuvenated the minds of the readers through his novelistic approach in his novel. The noteworthy Canadian writers are Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen, and Margaret Laurence. Most of the themes handled by the Canadian writers are Theme of Isolation and Identity crisis. His protagonists undergo a lot of turmoils to acquire their identity in the foreign land. The novels which are written by Richler would make everyone wonder that it could be his autobiography. There are many instances which are seen vividly in the portrayal of his characters. The chief characters of his novel tries to escape the ghettoistic life and try to search for identity by establishing it to survive in a new land. The protagonists have no way to escape as they are caught in a dilemma if they have to lead their life adhering to rites and rituals of Jews and be with the family or by creating a new identity for them by estranging from the Jewish

ghetto. This paper exclusively deals with the search for the quest of identity in Richler's novel 'Solomon Gursky Was Here'.

Keywords: Identity, Ghetto, rituals, trials.

INTRODUCTION:

Richler views Canada through the prism of the Jewish experience by using the history of the Gursky family as a microcosm for the history of the country. The novel "Solomon Gursky Was Here" is filled with fun and humour at the expense of parvenu Jews in their pretentious Montreal mansion and ruthless Jews making their fortunes in "raw, illicit whisky," but that is largely for comic effect. Richler emphatically states that the Jews of Canada have added more claims to its history as they were in there at the beginning and the denial of the fact leads to denying Canada as a country.

It is a novel which is perfectly amalgamated with humor and anger juxtaposed. Richler, in every novel deals with his own Jewish clans search for origins. He attempts to create origins and legitimate Canadian credentials through a new Artic tribe made up of some members of a Jewish family and native women who consort with them. The novel's intricate chronology spans from the early nineteenth century to 1983, when Berger decides to abandon his frustrating quest for Solomon Gursky, whose biography sets out to be written forty years earlier and through whom he was drawn into a confusion of Canadian and world history. It is the story of the obsession of Moses Berger, a Rhodes Scholar turned alcoholic, with Solomon Gursky, the charismatic son of a poor immigrant, with his brother Bernard and Morrie, built the massive liquor empire of McTavish industries. Moses is attempting to write a biography of Solomon, which becomes his life's work. Through his investigations, the complex story of five generations

of Gurskys is revealed. The eldest is Ephraim, Solomon's criminal, perpetually scheming grandfather, Ephraim, is constantly associated with the raven, he escaped imprisonment in England in the mid 1800s by forging documents, also allowing him to join a crew searching for the Northwest passage, called the Franklin Expedition. The expedition turned into a total disaster, Ephraim, the sole survivor. The youngest Gursky appearing in this story is Isaac, Solomon's grandson. This complex tale unravels, as Moses recalls, all the events in his life which pertains to it. Ever present in this Canadian cultural satire are the theme of filial relationships and the exploration of Solomon and his re-incarnation as Sir Hyman Kaplansky, in conjunction with his family and their exploits. Every character in this novel is in some way corrupt or failure. Moses is an alcoholic who did not live up to his potential; Bernard is a greedy self-centered bastard;

Solomon Gursky is the black sheep in a Jewish Canadian family whose billions were earned from a bootlegging enterprise during Prohibition. While his brothers concentrate on the family business, Solomon Gursky chooses a path very different from that of his two brothers, Bernard, the businessman and Morrie, the weak willed one. There is a great deal of grandfather's influence in this novel as happens with few novels of Richler like *An Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Son of A Smaller Hero* as Solomon is taken by his energetic grandfather Ephraim to the Polar Sea when he was young, Solomon learns and practices survival and strange mystical rituals of the North that in some form or other are all based on Jewish customs. He commits himself to causes of national and international importance. He fights in World War I, supports European resistance against Hitler and tries to promote Jewish immigration to Canada. He has chosen the Karl Marx quotation as a motto for his life: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point, however, is to change it" (SGH 159). When Gurskys are

brought to trial officially for bootlegging, because of Solomon's campaign for the Jews-Bernie makes Solomon the family scapegoat. Solomon manages to escape and allegedly dies in a plane crash in remote Canadian North. However, Solomon survives and hence forward, in the guise of several personae.

Solomon is a cheat, when it comes to gambling, women and anything else you can think of Richler, through this exaggeration of corruption and failure, is satirizing the idea that Canada is a second rated nation. Moses says:

Canada is not so much a country as a holding tank filled with the
Disgruntled progeny of defeated peoples. The French-Canadians consumed
By self-pity; the descendants of Scotts who fled the Duke of Chamberlain;
Irish the famine; and the Jews the black hundreds. Then, there are the peasants
From the Ukraine, Poland, Italy and Greece, convenient to grow wheat and
dig out ore and swing the hammers and run the restaurants, but otherwise
to be kept in their place. Most of us are still huddled tight to the border,
looking into the candy store window, scared by the Americans on one side
and the bush on the other. (SGH 398-399).

There is an ambivalence which constitutes the eternal Jewish dilemma; if Jews themselves think of Canada as a country of exile, then how can they expect to be recognized as

full-fledged Canadians? (Tora 32). Grandfather Ephraim's escapades in the Arctic provide the entire Gursky clan with Canadian credentials. Mr. Bernard, the brother of Solomon says:

The Gurskys didn't come here steerage fleeing from some dirty village.

My family was established here before Canada even became a country...

We are older, how about that?... Ephraim's first job was a coalminer. (SGH 227)

Mr. Bernard tries to acquire the social skills to establish his identity. Throughout his successful career as a liquor smuggler and salesman. Mr. Bernard never felt that he had really made it up the social ladder. After his death, his brother Morie eulogizes:

"You know what my poor brother really wanted, he never got." "What he

Wanted was to be accepted by them may be appointed as Ambassador like

Joe Kennedy" (SGH 261).

He is sad that Jews are not duly recognized and not well treated. Bert Smith, a customs clerk, in the novel, took it upon himself single-handedly to prosecute Mr. Bernard for liquor trafficking. He says: "Those who do not accept Jesus can never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (SGH 336). Backy Schwartz, in the novel, is a lady with ambition who wants to climb up the social ladder and she succeeds. Diane, the Gentile girl, is a contrast to her. Solomon falls in love with her but cannot marry her owing to social obstacles. This terribly upsets him. He is rich and runs an aero plane service. Unfortunately, on one of his trips to Artic, his plane crashes and disappears. The reader is left to reach his own conclusions. Is it a suicide? A Man like Solomon cannot admit defeat. The only way out was self-destruction.

Moses turns to alcohol for comfort because he realizes that the desperate search for status is totally futile. The search for recognition is really a quest for a home to the Jews. In his essay, "The Question for Recognition", Tora Clara opines:

In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Mordecai Richler attempts to create origins

And legitimize Canadian credentials through a new Arctic tribe made up of

Some members of a Jewish family and native women who consort with

Them. The novelist manages to capture our attention and imagination by

creating an amalgam of Arctic, Jewish, financial and alcoholic histories.

The Gurskys are scoundrels, altering between a seedy underworld and a

Normal world in which they yearn for acceptance, recognition and

Respectability. (24)

From the underworld of nineteenth century London, through the Franklin expedition and the Arctic, to the prohibition years to the prairies and the eastern township of Quebec, Richler's mean and women seem to be real and come alive against the background of his own peculiar reality. In this novel, Mordecai Richler tries to fuse the Jewish and the Canadian historical experiences. What one comes to understand is that for all its gleeful obscenity and dirty dealings, "*Solomon Gursky Was Here*" is a moral novel. Rage - moral rage - fuels Mordecai Richler's imagination, and it's no accident that his characters boil at a steady simmer: Moses Berger the biographer is furious at his father, L. B., who became Bernard Gursky's speechwriter, and angry at the liquor baron for buying L. B.'s soul; Bert Smith, a bigoted customs inspector, rages at the

"grabby cheeky foreigners" diluting Canada's racial purity; and the Gurskys are so mad at one another that it seems quite likely there's some question about whether Solomon's death might not have been really accidental. Villains outnumber heroes here, and the principal targets of Mr. Richler's ire are stupidity, betrayal, tyranny and especially greed - that most au courant of sins - in all its various guises: corporate, personal, carnal. Bernard Gursky ("capitalism's ugliest face") and his Machiavellian son Lionel are only the most visible manifestations of rapacious hunger for money and power. For, as Solomon notes, "Dig deep enough into the past of any noble family and there is a Bernard at the root. The founder with the dirty finger nails. The killer." Yet what occasionally blurs the book's moral focus is that Mr. Richler "does" tastelessness and vulgar display so much more damningly, hilariously and with so much more relish than flat-out evil. Consequently, Bernard's self-congratulatory, sloppily sentimental testimonial dinner - a Canadian Football League official presents "Mr. Bernard" with an autographed ball that he then gives to a paraplegic boy in front of 300 cheering guests - and his niece Lucy Gursky's vile, vanity production of "The Diary of Anne Frank" are made to appear more memorably awful than the Ottawa immigration official who scuttles Solomon's efforts to shelter refugees from Hitler before World War II. (Just as Moses Berger's personal trial is to walk past a bar without taking a drink, one feels that set-piece scenes of excruciating Jewish social occasions are Mr. Richler's particular temptation, hard to pass up. Equally distracting is the fact that while the novel's plot turns are seldom predictable, its characters often are: the bigot is a repressed religious nut, the millionaire a pompous slob and, most upsettingly, the Eskimos a bunch of whoop-em-up mystic blubber-chewers and wife-swappers.

CONCLUSION:

The central focus of Richler's novels is the presentation of the immigrant society with all its vagaries. The question of identity becomes an indefinable ideal as the characters undergo several torments to establish them. The modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual predicament in terms of alienation or exile or quest for identity. By incorporating part of the Gursky family into the Canadian Arctic, he attempts to create a *fait accompli*. Not only are they Canadians, but they are to be considered as part and parcel of the original authentic inhabitants of the land. Their Canadian credentials are thus established and their marginality is to become neutralized. But the world continues to turn and the Jews continue to seek their place in it and above all recognition.

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