

Survival and Identity: A Postmodern Exploration of Jewish Experience in Mordecai Richler's Novels

Veena Jangra¹, Dr. B. K. Jha²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

²Professor, Dept. of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Article history: Received: 24 September 2024, Accepted: 30 October 2024, Published online: 05 November 2024.

Abstract

This paper examines Mordecai Richler's exploration of the Jewish experience in Montreal through a postmodern lens, focusing on the themes of survival and identity. Richler's works, notably *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971), and *A Choice of Enemies* (1957), depict the complexities of the Jewish immigrant experience in postwar Canadian society, delving into the tensions between cultural assimilation and the desire to assert a distinct Jewish identity. The study uses postmodernist theories to explore the multifaceted narratives of Jewish characters who confront cultural marginalization, generational conflicts, and self-definition in a fragmented, postmodern world. By investigating Richler's treatment of identity, survival, and cultural perseverance, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how postmodernism intersects with the Jewish experience in Montreal.

Keywords: Jewish Identity, Postmodernism, Montreal, Survival, Assimilation, Cultural Preservation, Self-Assertion, Jewish Immigrant Experience.

Introduction

Mordecai Richler is often regarded as one of the foremost voices in Canadian literature, particularly for his candid portrayal of Jewish identity in postwar Montreal. His works reflect the intricate process of navigating identity, survival, and cultural preservation within a society that is both nurturing and exclusionary. Richler's Jewish protagonists grapple with the dissonance of being both part of the Jewish community and members of a broader Canadian society that often marginalizes them. This paper seeks to explore how Richler's works embody the tensions between survival and identity through the lens of postmodernism. The novels *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, and *A Choice of Enemies* represent a postmodern exploration of the Jewish experience in Montreal, wherein survival means navigating a fractured identity and a world in flux.

Postmodernism and Jewish Identity

Postmodernism, with its emphasis on the fragmentation of narratives, scepticism toward grand narratives, and the dissolution of fixed meanings, offers a useful framework for analysing the Jewish experience in Mordecai Richler's novels. The central tenets of postmodernism—relativism, intertextuality, and playfulness—manifest in Richler's treatment of identity as fluid, unstable, and in constant negotiation. Identity in a postmodern context is no longer seen as a fixed essence but as something constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through lived experiences, cultural clashes, and individual desires.

In the context of Jewish identity, postmodernism challenges traditional portrayals of cultural and religious homogeneity. Rather than presenting a monolithic Jewish experience, Richler's characters reflect the diversity of experiences within the Jewish community, particularly in the face of assimilation into a predominantly Anglo-Saxon Canadian society. Jewish identity, then, is seen as a site of constant negotiation, influenced by generational tensions, historical experiences, and personal aspirations.

Survival and Identity in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler introduces the character of Duddy, a young Jewish man who is determined to escape the socio-economic limitations imposed by his family's background and his Jewish heritage. Duddy's pursuit of wealth and success is motivated by a desire to assert his identity beyond the confines of the Montreal ghetto, where Jewish immigrants are often marginalized and stereotyped. However, Duddy's journey is

fraught with moral compromises and a deep sense of alienation, reflecting the postmodern condition of fragmented selfhood.

Duddy's survivalist mentality—where he strives to accumulate power, land, and influence—illustrates the complex relationship between identity and material success. His refusal to conform to the expectations of his Jewish family and community, and his willingness to abandon his heritage for personal gain, represent the tension between survival and cultural authenticity. Postmodernism's focus on the instability of identity is evident in Duddy's character arc: his quest for self-definition is undercut by the realization that true identity cannot be achieved through mere external success. Duddy's ultimate failure underscores the paradox of trying to construct an identity in a world where meaning is fleeting and unreliable.

Postmodern Jewish Identity in *St. Urbain's Horseman*

In *St. Urbain's Horseman*, Richler expands on themes of Jewish identity and survival through the character of Jake, a Jewish intellectual who grapples with the disillusionment of postwar Canadian society. Jake's struggle with his Jewish heritage and the broader societal forces at play reflects a postmodern critique of cultural assimilation. The novel's fragmented narrative, shifting perspectives, and nonlinear structure mirror the fractured identity of the protagonist as he navigates his relationship with Montreal's Jewish community, his family, and his own moral compass.

Jake's return to Montreal after years of living abroad serves as a metaphor for the complexities of reconciling personal and cultural identity. The tension between cultural preservation and assimilation becomes central to Jake's journey, reflecting the broader postmodern theme of identity as a construct subject to external forces. The postmodern sensibility of *St. Urbain's Horseman* lies in its exploration of identity as malleable and contingent, shaped by historical events, personal choices, and the intersecting narratives of the immigrant experience. Richler's depiction of Montreal as a divided city, where different ethnic and cultural groups are both isolated and interconnected, highlights the fragmented nature of identity in the postmodern world.

Generational Conflicts and Identity in *A Choice of Enemies*

A Choice of Enemies delves into the generational conflict within the Jewish community in Montreal, focusing on the tensions between older immigrants who cling to their cultural traditions and younger generations eager to assimilate into Canadian society. Richler uses the postmodern narrative strategy of multiple viewpoints to show how different characters perceive the same events and how these perceptions influence their sense of identity.

The novel's protagonists are caught in a struggle to define themselves in a society that offers them the promise of success and acceptance but demands the sacrifice of cultural identity. The generational conflict highlights the difficulties of balancing cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation. Richler presents this tension through the contrasting perspectives of the older and younger characters, emphasizing the postmodern notion of identity as a process of negotiation and reinterpretation. The characters' survival is not just physical but psychological and emotional, as they must reconcile the past with the present in order to carve out an identity that is both authentic and viable in a rapidly changing world.

The Role of Montreal as a Symbolic Space

Montreal itself plays a crucial role in shaping the Jewish identity of Richler's characters. The city is portrayed as a microcosm of postmodern fragmentation, where various ethnic communities coexist in close proximity but are often isolated by cultural, social, and economic boundaries. The Jewish ghetto in Montreal functions as both a physical and symbolic space for the negotiation of identity. It is within this space that Richler's characters confront their Jewish heritage, their place in Canadian society, and their aspirations for personal success.

Richler's depiction of Montreal as a city divided along ethnic lines reflects the postmodern critique of the city as a fragmented, contested space. The city's cultural diversity is both a source of strength and a site of conflict, where different identities compete for recognition and survival. This setting underscores the postmodern theme of the fluidity of identity and the tension between belonging to a community and seeking individual autonomy.

Postmodern Approaches to Narrative and Characterization

One of the distinctive features of Richler's work is his use of postmodern narrative techniques. These include fragmented storylines, unreliable narrators, and intertextual references, all of which challenge the reader's expectations and emphasize the complexity of the characters' identities. Richler's characters are often seen as embodying multiple, sometimes contradictory, identities. This reflects the postmodern notion of identity as a construction rather than a fixed essence.

In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy's narrative unfolds in a nonlinear fashion, underscoring his moral decline and self-delusion. The fragmented narrative mirrors Duddy's fragmented identity, as he is torn between his aspirations and the cultural values instilled by his Jewish family. Similarly, in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the fragmented narrative structure represents the fractured sense of identity experienced by Jake, who struggles with both his personal and collective histories.

Richler's use of intertextuality further enhances the postmodern exploration of identity. His novels reference not only Jewish literature and history but also popular culture, thereby creating a dialogue between different cultural and literary traditions. This interplay between texts challenges traditional notions of cultural authenticity and highlights the fluid nature of identity in a postmodern world.

Conclusion

Mordecai Richler's novels offer a postmodern exploration of the Jewish experience in Montreal, focusing on the themes of survival and identity. Through his complex characters and fractured narratives, Richler depicts the challenges faced by Jewish immigrants as they navigate the tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation in a postwar Canadian society. Richler's treatment of identity in his novels emphasizes the postmodern understanding of identity as fluid, fragmented, and in constant negotiation. The novels also highlight the complexities of generational conflict, cultural survival, and the emotional toll of living in a society that both welcomes and excludes marginalized communities. By examining Richler's works through a postmodern lens, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the Jewish immigrant experience in Montreal and the broader themes of survival, assimilation, and cultural perseverance in Canadian literature.

References

- [1]. Richler, Mordecai. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. McClelland & Stewart, 1959.
- [2]. Richler, Mordecai. *St. Urbain's Horseman*. McClelland & Stewart, 1971.
- [3]. Richler, Mordecai. *A Choice of Enemies*. McClelland & Stewart, 1957.
- [4]. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Methuen, 1985.
- [5]. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- [6]. Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.