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கலை இலக்கியப் பண்பாட்டுத் தமிழ் ஆய்விதழ்

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## **Man - Environment Relationship in Mordecai Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero***

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Environment is defined as a surrounding or condition that influences development or growth. It can be defined as a system which includes all living things, viz, air, water, soil, vegetation, flora and fauna. Man is a slave to environment. Man may have all kinds of capacities but he cannot be developed fully without a proper environment. Environment starts influencing man from the stage of embryo. This influence has been called 'Social Heredity' by Western Scholars. Man finds himself surrounded by innumerable objects and circumstances which influence him. Environment is anything immediately surrounding an object and exerting a direct influence on him. Environment is the field of effective stimulation and interaction. Environment can be classified into three types :

1. Natural Environment : It includes the natural things, e.g. air, water, mountains, moon, sun, etc.
2. Social Environment : Man is always surrounded by society because he is a social being / social animal.
3. Cultural Environment : It includes social rules and regulations, traditions, customs, etc.

Environment may be broadly understood to mean man's surroundings in general. It can be divided into non-living and living components. The environment provides resources which support life on the earth and which also help in the growth of a relationship of interchange between living organisms and the environment in which they live. The relationship between man and his environment is significant and reciprocal.

Human beings are endowed by nature to be reflective and active. Their biological evolution gives them capacity to forge tools and establish relationship with the environment. In the beginning, human life was more biological than cultural and was somewhat similar to other animals where environmental considerations dictated the place of human residence.

The traditional understanding of environment has been that it is a system created by God for the sustenance of human being. Environment is a static entity with little or no great possibilities of change. It is a law of nature that species will rapidly become extinct when confronted with a sudden change in environment or with a new foe whose ways it does not understand. Generally, people are indifferent to their environment. Newton's third law states, 'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction'. This will equally apply to man's relationship with nature as it relates to application of force on



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inanimate objects. An understanding of the landscape and an identity with the land and the nature would give them a sense of belonging, solace, as well as a consciousness of personality and a self-awareness. Not only the physical features of the landscape, but also an emotional closeness with nature would greatly help them in the process of development.

Canadian environment has ten provinces separated by the natural barriers of mountains, prairies, and water. Added to this is the divisive bicultural aspect of English and French Canada, always a source of great anxiety which threatens to split the country into two. Being a multicultural society, Canada has so many diverse qualities and culture in which a national identity could be evolved only in mosaic. Canada has men of sober conduct to settle on the land. The cold, frigid and frustrating landscape covered with snow sent icy and disturbing pangs down the consciousness of the colonizers. Canadians have an anguish in their effort to confront the land which afforded but few areas of choice. The raw nature and its chilling power give way to fear and frustration. The landscape of unending snow refuses to be tamed. Snow is barbaric, rude, and ruthless in Canadian environment. It therefore breeds a sense of alienation in man. It thwarts all attempts at communication and identification with the land. It asserts the negative identity in man. Canada is beyond repair. F.R. Scott in his "Laurentian Shield" writes:

Hidden in wonder and snow, or sudden with summer,  
This land stares at the sun in a huge silence  
Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear. (Qtd in **Alien Voice** 161)

Geographically and historically, Canada is a fascinating country, offering its artist a variety of landscapes as backdrops, a desirable mixture of races and cultures to provide an infinite number of themes with suitable ambiances. Canada may be poor in soil and climate but it is rich in minerals and in a few other natural resources. These attract people from other parts of the world, especially from over populated countries. Canada with its easy immigration laws extends a warm welcome to the adventurous, to those who are enterprising and willing to find their place in this land and make their contribution to its prosperity. The Canadian artist has at his disposal various landscapes both exterior and interior. If he happens to be an immigrant, the landscapes available to him become much vaster and more varied.

Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) is the long best-known Canadian writer on the English-speaking international scene. Richler's novels are set in Montreal Jewish ghetto world. His characters remain victims of their environment. The central characters are some type of inter-racial or inter-ethnic mixture. They remain representatives of unprotected humanity; the marginalized citizens of the new state left by colonialism or anti-semitism. They see their



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environment as a continuing struggle between individuals and landscape of walled ghettos and their life throughout the ages. There will always be conquerors and conquered.

Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) vividly recreates the Montreal Jewish environment of Richler's youth and provides an incisive study of the growth of a sensitive, intense, Jewish youth, Noah, in his hostile environment. The novel focuses on Jewish society and Jewish characters. As in all his fiction set in Jewish communities which are peopled by Jews, he looks beneath the racial to the human and uses the Jewish world as a metaphor for human experience. The novel transcends time, place, and race. It is at once Jewish, Canadian, and Universal.

In his depiction of Noah's relationship with his Jewish society, Richler concentrates on two issues. The first is Noah's tormenting love-hate relationship with his community, which is felt throughout the novel from the opening chapter where he escapes, yet yearns for his home, to the last where he tells his grandfather, Melech, that he is going and not going. The second is Noah's rejection of his grandfather's severe morality. He admires his grandfather's sense of responsibility to his family but questions his unswerving adherence to harsh laws and his stern, just, and merciless God. In the last chapter, Noah, who fears he may become as severe as his grandfather, learns to accept what Melech will never allow that compromise is possible without betrayal, and that flexibility and tolerance must supersede rigidity and ensure human relationships.

In *Smaller Hero*, Richler presents two worlds. The half-Bohemian Goy world, from which Miriam emerges to meet Noah, is painted in grayish tones and blurred forms as befits a limbo of atrophied look and intellectual sterility. The second one, the Jewish world is painted with a vividness that suggests the vitality and variety of human impulse stirring beneath a surface stiffened by traditions and fears. The social background is rendered in a fine chiaroscuro. In it, social darkness is illumined by great flashes of comedy. It erupts magnificently into the center of the picture in the mass hysteria that accompanied the funeral of Noah's father, Wolf Adler, at which he is mistakenly hailed as a hero who gave his life to save the sacred scrolls of the Torah. The inhabitants of the ghetto are depicted with a cruel sharp eye for the foibles of their environments.

The family of Melech Adler illustrates the process of change and disintegration within a Jewish environment. Melech Adler, the head of the family, has "ruled all his children by authority" (14). He says, "This is my house and I am the boss. First, last and always" (19). His anger and words are still law. His wife, Jenny, leads only a mechanical life even without enough



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rest. Melech's children disobey him behind his back though they pretend to be obedient before him. The eldest of the ten children, Wolf Adler, has no love for his father for his father did not make him a partner in his business. Very often Wolf will lean back in his chair and brood about how much money there must be in the locked box that his father keeps in the office safe. To him, the box is very important for it symbolizes all that he wanted to achieve in life, wealth, prosperity, and a bright future. He lacks the power of his father and the initiative of his son, Noah. Melech thrives by enslaving his wife and children. Noah endeavours to escape enslavement and annihilation but Wolf is caught between these two impulses and becomes inactive.

In that process, Wolf Adler's death is the central incident which exposes the whole pattern of private rebellion that has spread its roots through the life of the Adler family. Wolf, working in the family coalyard under old Melech's patriarchal tyranny, has been fascinated for years by the box that his father – Noah's grandfather – keeps in the safe and will only be behind his locked office door. When Shloine, Melech's youngest son, rebels into minor gangsterism and sets fire to the coalyard buildings, Wolf's obsession leads him to run blindly into the burning office. Noah eventually finds him under the charred rubbish, with his hand inside the box. It contains no money. It does contain the clues that will lead Noah eventually to an understanding of his own world and his own nature. The revelation, like the contents of the box, is of two kinds: for the onlookers it contains the sacred scrolls that lie on top and make him a saint of Torah – the man who dies in suicide craving for money becomes the saint of the ghetto – and on the other Noah sees that the box creates a lie but reveals a truth to Noah when he examines the bundle of photographs and letters he has found there and has concealed in his pocket. As he rather guiltily looks through them, his life is suddenly filled with echoes. He realizes that just as he sought liberation through his love affair with Miriam, so, half a century before, his orthodox grandfather carried on a love affair with a gentile girl in Poland, and even continued until his old age to write her letters that were never posted. This is the other side of the show of iron rectitude with which Melech tries to rule his family. Noah has seen the hollowness of that rectitude in childhood when he detected his grandfather in an act of business dishonesty. That incident in the coalyard transformed his love into a hostility which lasted into his young manhood. Only the human softness shown in Melech's nursing of an ancient passion almost reconciles Noah to him in the end. Noah also finds that his uncle Max, the brashest and richest of all Melech's sons, has fallen under the spell of his blonde secretary, Miss Holmes, who despises him. These men of the ghetto yearn towards the feminine personifications of what seems a freer world beyond the invisible walls in the Jewish rigid environment. Noah, like many modern youths, renounced a world with which he had at least been familiar and "no new world had as yet replaced it. He was



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hungering for an anchor or a community or a tradition to which he could relate his experience”(60). Having started loving Miriam and living with her, he tried to forget the world of his grandfather and father without any regret.

Noah in the end realizes the inevitable need for some knowledge of himself that would make him independent for some self definition that will not merely be in terms of opposition. He must uncover the truth and refuse to live by the tempting evasion. His ruthlessness appears again by something very near to Blackmail. He forces his uncle Max to cease exploiting the legend of Wolf Adler, the hero. He appears to have partial reconciliation with Melech, who had hoped to make him ‘a something’.

The environments of Noah and Miriam are contradictory. As Noah has to fight against the conventional notions of family, religion, and especially sexual repression adhered to by the society, he has often felt depressed and uninterested in love making in the later phase of his life. As a result, he has begun to slip away from her presence by fixing up one of his rooms as his study-room. Moreover, he felt that she has been watching him and waiting for him anxiously at the next room. Loving has become his responsibility and offered no freedom except the feeling of slavery and burden to him. Miriam has also begun to search for men that could unite her with Noah. She has almost realized that her life in its experimental level has not eliminated imagination but has assigned it an initiatory rather than a divisive role. She has not been able to fall back or to go forward with Noah when things have begun to fall out in Noah’s house as she is not a Jewess to suit her younger lover. She has been torn between the fear of losing him and the fear that she should let herself go before it is too late to Theo. Noah’s father’s death terminated their love affair.

The Jewish society is traditionally a patriarchal one. Women have no active say in the socio-economic affairs of the family. Either they remain meek housewives playing second fiddle to the stand taken by the family patriarchs or they do the role of bread winners for their families where the ineffectual husbands are busy elsewhere. In *Smaller Hero* there is the Adler clan with Melech Adler as its patriarch. He and his wife Jenny are aged and there is no warmth between them. It is Melech who thunders all the time and Jenny always moans in return. In the entire novel, there is not a tender moment between them. In all her life, Jenny has remained just a child-bearing machine and her only consolation is her children. To quote from the novel :

She had no money or wisdom to offer them, so when they were in trouble she bated them extra buns. She did not want Melech to alienate her from the children. He learned the other way when she undressed herself. Or, if he looked at all, his



eyes were sorrowful, she wished secretly that he would touch her sometimes. Or look at her lovingly. He had used to do that. (20)

Leah, who is married to Wolf Adler, an ineffectual husband, has also faced such a patriarchal environment. Leah is pained by the awkward and self-defeating mentality of her husband. When she finds her husband incompatible, she pins her hopes on her son, Noah. Towards the end of the novel, her husband foolishly meets with his death and Noah leaves for Europe, seeking his fortunes, leaving Leah in deathbed. Thus, Leah finds herself a struggling lonely figure at the end of the novel.

The man around here are afraid of women, especially tacky ones. They like huntin' and fishin' and watching 'Hockey Night in Canada' on TV and talking dirty about us in The Trapline. (45)

In all his novels Richler portrays Canada as the farcical jungle. The nation happens to be a poor imitator of American culture. Richler feels that there is still a spontaneous imitation of American culture and business methods in Canada. To him, cultural nationalism should be born out of just-pride of one's culture in his own environment.

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