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Displaced Diasporic Identities – A Case Study of Mordecai Richler's
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**Displaced Diasporic Identities –
A Case Study of Mordecai Richler’s
*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz***

**J. Samuel Kirubahar, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D.
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By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,
Yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion ... (Psalm 137:1)

The heartrending theme of the Diasporic identity had its recorded origin in these verses in the Book of Psalms, and continues down the ages of the history of mankind. The Jewish Diaspora has seen an endless progression and the scattered Jews contribute to the literary world, the meaning of this deep concept.

Closer home, a great modern Tamil poet, Subramania Bharathi, wrote a passionate poem in 1920's depicting the hard living conditions of Tamil migrants to the sugar plantations in the Fiji Islands.

M. K. Gandhi, long before he came to be known Mahatma, submitted his resolutions to the 1901 Indian National Congress session in Calcutta support of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa and elsewhere. In every nation in this world, there is always concern expressed about the conditions of their own diaspora
(<http://www.languageinindia.com/april2005/earlygandhi1.html>)

Diaspora and Location of Cultures

Homi K. Babha in his book *Location of Cultures* echoes this when he writes about ‘the great history of the languages and landscapes of migration and Diaspora’ where the new identity is born.

The literature on the subject of the migrants, the colonised or the political refugees could take on the mission of dislocating conventional ways of accepted wisdom about the world and discovering the hybridity, and the divergence that exists within.

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Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*

Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* explores the life of Duddy in a diasporic location. Living in a borrowed culture the character needs to know who he is, where he is and where he stands in that specific location. The rigidity between local, regional and diasporic identities is vital to Richler's writings.

The Idea of *Home*

There is a need to probe deeper into the idea of home to establish a diasporic identity.

1. What is the idea of 'home' for migrants who live far from the land of their birth and their ancestors?
2. Does the migrant occupy a displaced position?
3. What are the transformations wrought by the experience of migrancy?
4. Does it bring fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement for the migrant?
5. What about the less tangible matters of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values.

This paper explores the work of fiction by Mordecai Richler with reference to these observations.

Diaspora Receives More Attention in Recent Literature

Identity is a product of history. The tension between the local, regional and diasporic identities is central to the writings of many writers in the Commonwealth countries. The experiences of migrancy and living in a Diaspora have received more attention in recent postcolonial literature, literary criticism and theory.

The nuances in the meaning of words like 'Diaspora' 'migrants' and 'postcolonial' have been quite overlapping and not free from controversies. The Diaspora communities are not free from controversies and the people have often been ghettoized and often excluded from the native community and made to feel that they do not belong to the 'new country'.

Contending Identities – The Concept of Home

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Avtar Brah in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* mentions that “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. When we probe deeper into this concept of “home” and “land”, we can see that it plays a vital role in the life of the migrant. As an idea it represents stability, shelter, security and comfort. To the migrant there is a dislocation between the past and the present, between here and there. Thus the migrant occupies a displaced position. Salman Rushdie opines that this leads to fragmentation and fissures.

Fragmentation and Discontinuity

When migrating from one country to another brings fragmentation and discontinuity and displacement, will getting a new home in this new land bring about the security and continuity that they long for?

The words of Derek Walcott echo this theme of Diaspora identity very aptly.

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.

Multiple and Mobile Identities – Old Country

Diaspora identities are presented as multiple and mobile, with their own inner tensions. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diaspora: An Introduction* defines Diaspora as communities of people who are living together in an alien country and they acknowledge that there is a certain attachment towards their ‘old country’, a notion buried deep in their language, religion, custom and culture.

This ‘old country’ always has a certain claim on their loyalty and emotions. The experiences of these people in various countries have opened wide the doors of post colonial literature, criticism and theory. Indeed one can identify that there are slippages between the terms ‘Diaspora’, ‘migrant’ and ‘postcolonial’.

The literature produced by ‘Diaspora writers’ have proved immensely popular in Western literary criticism.

The Confluence of Narratives

Diaspora people qualify for a citizenship in their adopted country, but their sense of identity that they have assumed in living in a diasporic community will be definitely

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influenced by their past migration history of their forefathers. That is why it is more precise to refer to diaspora identities rather than migrant identities. Avtar Brah no doubt puts it concisely in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, where she asserts the fact that there are distinct diasporic communities that are shaped 'out of the confluence of narratives' of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new which once again creates the sense of shared history (p.183).

There is also the need to understand that all diasporas are 'differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces'(p.184) Gender, race, class, religion and language make diaspora space dynamic and shifting, open to repeated construction and reconstruction.(McLeod,207)

Mordecai Richler's Work

Mordecai Richler, a Canadian writer is able to bring out these themes in his masterpiece *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. It is a commercial and an artistic triumph.

Duddy Kravitz is a young, poor Jewish boy in Montreal. His desires are embodied in the possession of land. He has a burgeoning obsession with money and power. His family, friends, teachers, girlfriends all lead to his desire for power, money and possession of land. Duddy is determined to climb from his Montreal Jewish Ghetto up the ladder of success. He pursues property and power with a resourcefulness and ruthless energy which the readers cannot help admiring. The land he covets is a 'promised land' of real estate, and in his tireless efforts to acquire it, he becomes the stereotype of the Jew boy or in Canadian terms an ironic depraved embodiment of the pioneering paradox.

A Polemicist Author

Richler is an author and a polemicist. He gives us uncompromising pictures of contemporary Canada. The Jewish life of the 1930s and the 40s in the neighbourhood of Montreal is painted realistically by Richler. He chronicles the hardships and disabilities they faced as a Jewish minority. He is an honest witness to his time and place. He is blatantly honest to tell the uncomfortable truth.

The Jews believed that the only way to bridge the poverty gap is to be materially successful like the Gentiles. They pursue money relentlessly and in amoral ways. From the moment Duddy hears his grandfather saying "A man without land is nobody", he is prepared to seek the land of his dreams, no matter what the cost would be. The idea 'home' has a lot of implications. It acts as a valuable means of orientation by giving the diasporic people a sense of their place in the world. It gives them an identity and also tells them where they originated from and where they belong.

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Duddy's Diasporic Moorings

Richler has the power to use the setting to set the tone or the atmosphere of his novel. The setting is seen as a reflection of the hero of the novel, Duddy himself. The city is Montreal. Duddy lives in the Jewish Ghetto which is situated in the lower part of the city. The people of St Urbain are dirty and decaying. Their houses are also dirty and decaying. Decay does not apply to the physical neighbourhood but also the lives of the people. West Mount is the place where the rich live. It is seen as "above" – above poverty and labour. Duddy is from "down there". The disparity is clearly shown in the conversation between Duddy and Mr. Cohen.

Yvette Durelle, his girl friend takes Duddy to the lake. She appreciates the scenic beauty of the place, but Duddy thinks about the land's development for profit. Lac St.Pierre becomes "the dream" for Duddy. Duddy heads back to Montreal and starts a film company, which becomes a huge success and he is able to buy a portion of the land. He makes profit on ten pinball machines from Virgil who is epileptic. Duddy takes advantage of Virgil's physical disabilities, and this makes Yvette and Virgil to move out of the mansion banning Duddy from ever seeing them again. There is no doubt that Duddy is very shrewd and clever, but his lack of moral principles attributes to his final failure.

His grandfather is sad by the way he obtained the land. Duddy is happy to have accomplished his goal of owning land and being somebody. His ambition is respectable, but his methods are damnable. He is a relentless and formidable competitor and a ruthless manipulator. He succeeds through immoral, despicable and contemptible means. He has murdered his character by forging the cheques, and has set his foot in the wrong direction. He is the most motivated young man who chooses the wrong way. The intelligent and tactful person opts to go wide of the mark to attain his goal. He fails to become a whole person.

Greed and Temptations

The novel is not only a study of human greed and the seductive temptations of materialist success, but also aims to portray the conditions of these migrants in their effort to become equal in status with the people of that nation. His effort to acquire land echoes the theme of the Promised Land. This points toward their emotional tie towards their "old country". They are uprooted from their own culture and they are settled in an alien nation, which they try to adopt as their own native land. Possessing land in this 'alien' land seems to show that they 'belong' to this land and to this nation.

Living on the Border

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Homi K. Bhabha in his book advocates new exciting ways of thinking about identity. *Location of Culture* identifies diasporic lives who live 'border lives' on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands. Borders are important thresholds, full of contradictions and ambivalence (Macleod, 217).

For Bhabha, the border is the place where conventional patterns of thought are disturbed and disrupted by the possibility of crossing. At the border the past and the present, the inside and the outside, the moral and the amoral, the ancient and the modern, no longer remain the same and separated as binary opposites but instead commingle and conflict.

From this emerge new shifting complex forms of representation that deny the binary setting. Richler has triumphed in creating such a character that is living a 'border life'. Duddy is living 'down there' and aspires to attain a place 'above there'.

The culture of the migrant does not remain static pure and holistic, but rather is regarded as intermingled and manifold. This is the main reason the character of Duddy is so multifaceted and complex. There is a certain moral complexity found in the characters created by Mordecai Richler. They hardly seem to be seeking the values by which 'a man can live with honour'. As a novelist of the modern city, he has succeeded in portraying the sense of people living close together, and the tension that it creates.

Uncertainties

The uncertainty arises whether the alien culture had absolutely altered the personality and integrity of Duddy. Critics perceive the autobiographical rudiments of Mordecai Richler in this novel. His parents wanted Richler to grow to be a Rabbi, but in his initial life Richler did not aspire to follow his parents and grand parents' footsteps but transparently acknowledged that he was an atheist, which distressed his parents very much.

At an incredibly young age Richler decided to be a writer. He referred to himself as a minority within a minority. He used his status as an irritable English-speaking Jew in the overwhelming French speaking province of Quebec to highlight the hypocrisies of contemporary life. In a peculiar way he reflected the ambiguous nature of his bilingual, bicultural homeland. Mordecai Richler was considered an icon of Canadian culture, who won all of Canada's most important literary awards and one of that culture's most withering critic.

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Hybridity

The concept of hybridity has proved very important for diaspora peoples. It goes beyond the exclusionary, fixed, binary notions of identity based on ideas of rootedness and cultural, racial and national purity. Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves. Instead they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription. This is where diasporic literature plays an important part.

The book ends pathetically but appropriately with Duddy being offered credit at a restaurant: for one who was refused loans when he desperately needed them, this represents 'status', but here as elsewhere he fails to recognize the crassness and vulgarity of his newly won position. He confuses material possessions with personal success.

The study of Duddy's character helps us to discover the hybridity and the difference that exists within. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. It is not an accomplished fact, which the new culture practices, but it is a product which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.

Diasporic identity is a matter of becoming as well as being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.

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