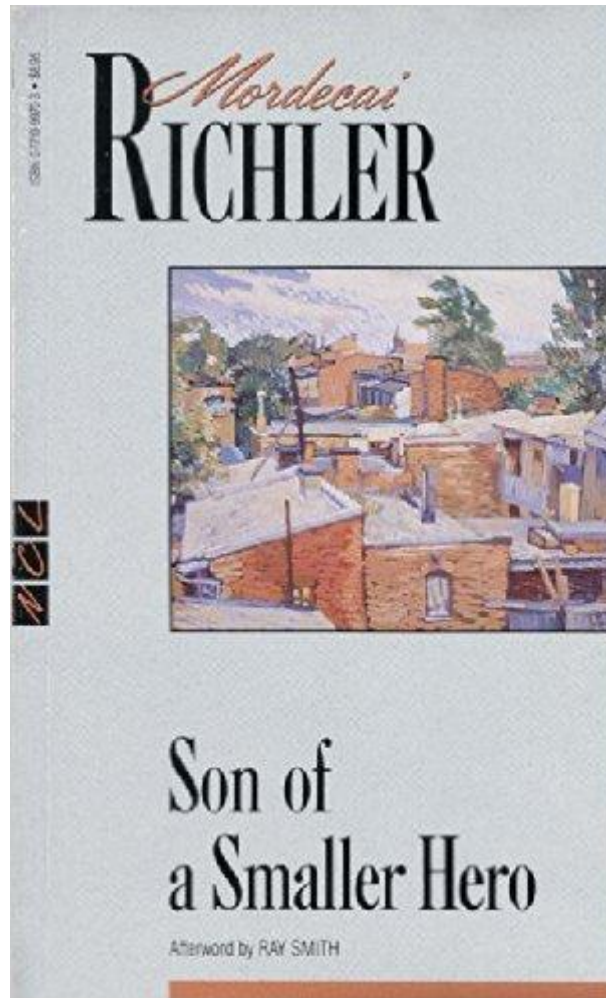


**In Search of Identity & Freedom:  
A Critical Study of Mordecai Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero* and  
Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock***

**Shyjee. P. V. and Dr. P. Selvam**

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**Abstract**

Mordecai Richler is a Jewish Canadian writer. His second novel *Son of a Smaller Hero* deals with Noah who tries to reject members of the family whom he resembles physically but not psychologically to find himself he see through them and replace their false values with his own definite values. *Cry the Peacock* is Anita Desai's first novel; it explores the inner world of Maya

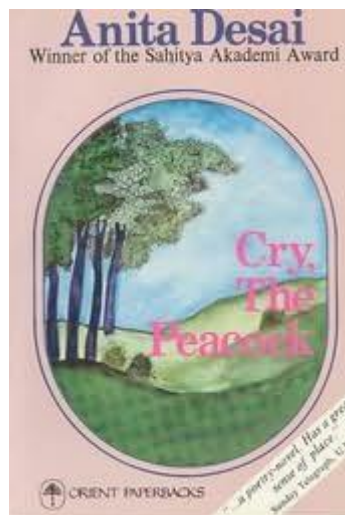
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and demonstrates her fear insecurity and strange behavior. Through her, she depicts a world of alienation, loneliness and suffering. Noah and Maya strive to escape from the tradition. Maya's husband Gautama represents the voice of patriarchy while Noah's grandfather Melech represents pluralism who strives to retain the Jewish culture in a foreign country, Canada. This paper focuses on the change in the identity of a character when they strive to move away from the traditional concept.

**Key words:** Identity crisis, pluralism, alienation, Mordecai Richler, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, Anita Desai, *Cry the Peacock*



### **Noah's Problems**

This paper focuses on the identity of the character Noah in Richler's *Son of a Smaller Hero*. Noah's search for freedom was ignited because he lacked the love by his family and society due to his habit of drinking. Alcohol is unacceptable in Jewish society. The problem of alcoholism is not only a personal problem; rather it disturbs their whole society. He was considered to be a black mark on their family Noah was hurt by hearing the conversation, "If you do things like that you will grow up like Noah" (SH 33). His isolation increased when "At weddings and barmitzahs voices were lowered when Noah joined the group" (SH 33) it is always the strange rules of the family that forced Noah to seek freedom. The family member could ask him "C'mon, have a drink" (SH 33). They didn't drink with him but watched

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approvingly. He offered to take their children to the circus or for walks on the mountain. They declined “What? A guy who drinks like you”(SH 33). Noah feels lost in his own family “I am sorry I think its freedom that I want. I – I no longer have any rules to refer to the way u had”. Noah reveals to Melech that rather than the Jewish concept his relation is based on money. When Melech remarks that “I wanted you to be somebody. Something. Something not like them. All there is for them is money.” “But, Zeyda, if money doesn’t worry you, why don’t u make my father a partner” (SH 34,35). Noah in this way makes clear to Melech that his attitude was money minded.

### **Trapped in Traditions**

Richler’s Noah gets trapped in the shackles of Jewish tradition. Anita Desai’s Maya unknowingly gets trapped in the fear of death revealed through an astrologer who prophesied about the death of any one of them in the fourth year of marital life.

The society in which Noah lived gave importance to tradition and culture which he was not supposed to break. Whenever he attempted to do so he was alienated.

Maya was in search of love. She lacked the love of Gautama. She makes the concept clear by asking him, “Why the cases are filed in the courts were for money, property and never for love, life, etc.” Maya tried to escape from the reality of life. Richler’s Noah tried to escape from the tradition of Jews. The cry of Noah is for developing the personality that he feels is bound in the Jewish culture. The cry of Maya is for understanding her own personality that is insecure similar to the birds in the trees that became exposed to the people due to the shedding down of leaves.

### **Individuals Who Resisted Constraints**

Noah and Maya are the representatives of the individuals who tried to remain away from the constraints. They find the culture to be a barrier in their way. Indian culture established on patriarchal society that leaves Maya as sheer toy in the hands of her father who fulfilled all her desires, who provided everything to his daughter but failed in opting an apt life partner for her

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she got married to a person twice of her age “How little he knows of her misery or how to comfort me. But then, he knew nothing that concerned me. Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing veins that ran under...” (CP 9) Maya got a husband who fulfilled her materialistic need but couldn't ever fill her lust for love. She remained marginalised based on her gender representing an Indian woman who had to remain mere a household wife with all the luxuries. She is the voice of the women of Indian society who remained mere an article of pride with their presence. Nobody cares for their feelings but require the presence as per their own requirement. Gautama wanted her to be happy but he loved his job rather than his companionship with Maya.

### **Enforced Authority and Resistance to It**

Richler's Melech, grandfather of Noah feels that his world is slipping away. The respect Melech expects is not being received. He speaks to his wife Leah “I work hard I work hard for them. I am not a thief. I work hard. You work hard. He should respect me.” (SH 19) Just as Noah tries to escape from the tradition in the same way Leah and Melech feel that they are not able to engage their younger generation in their religion and tradition as they are not in their native land “We are old this ain't our country, Melech. Here they grow away from us.” (SH 19) In such circumstance also Melech wishes to establish authority over his family. Melech remarks “This is my house and I am the boss. I am his grandfather I tell you” (SH 21). The tendency to deviate from a tradition or culture arises only when the authority is imposed in a strict manner. He is alienated by his family “you are no longer welcome here .Understand? Finished? ... Can't you see how everything is falling apart around you? Your sons are Canadians.” (SH 34) It is the patriarchy that led to Maya's dissatisfied life. She confronts reality as multiple and subjective.

### **The Problem of Identity**

The important problem of present era is the problem of identity that arouses as the individual passes through a severe crisis. Earlier the identity was fixed. Rejecting the shackles of tradition was a step forward towards human emancipation. Richler's Noah ‘a passionate, ruthlessly idealistic young man finds tradition in league with self-delusion; he attempts to shatter the ghetto's illusory walls by entering the foreign territory of the goyim’. While Maya in *Cry the*

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*Peacock* get obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster and remains in a world created by herself of fear and insecurity.

### **Celebration of Disintegration**

Identity has become an issue in the present age. The individuals, rather than striving for recognition, celebrate disintegration presenting themselves in the multicultural society as salad bowls. The protagonists of both the novels celebrate their disintegration. Maya's frustration stimulates her to kill Gautama who fails to impart the affection and love she expected. Noah leaves his home and moves to Europe proving the concept 'Each man creates God in his own image. Melech's God, who was stern sometimes just and always without mercy, would reward him and punish the boy' (SH 36). Noah shifts to Europe because of his quench for new culture away from his own tradition that he feels won't leave him. The individuality is celebrated.

### **No Escape from Traditional Culture?**

Maya doesn't make an attempt to come out of her utopian world and always feels that she is not taken care of by Gautama. Her search for freedom and identity continues in her own realm where she tries to destroy his enemy and remain in paranoia. Noah's search for identity continues, he leaves his native land and finds a *goyim*, Miriam, but in his individualistic attempt he couldn't stick to her and feels that even if he wanders in a foreign land, his traditional culture moves along with him which doesn't allow him to get immersed in the alien culture, leaving his personality a trace of mosaic culture. True to the modern concept the world is created by oneself in the way how a person approaches it.

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