



MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN MORDECAI RICHLER'S *THE
INCOMPARABLE ATUK*

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Abstract:

Mordecai Richler, prominent Canadian writer, writes about himself and about his society. The Jewishness, Canadianness, and secularism are the central issues in his writing. His novels highlight the social importance of immigration and the ethnic diversity of its native inhabitants. The characters in his novels represent various cultural groups who celebrate the traditional values. As a writer, he criticizes amoral contemporary society, and wishes to change it to accommodate them all. Canada includes people from different religious groups like English, French, aboriginals, Muslims and Jews. The need of religiously diverse people leads to the realization of literature that plays significant role in the development of understanding across cultures. To aid the understanding of other culture, many researchers emphasize the requirement of intercultural and multicultural literature.

The multicultural stance is omnipresent in *The Incomparable Atuk* written by Mordecai Richler who anticipates the ideal society with the various multicultural encounters presented in the novel. The protagonist Eskimo, Atuk, migrates to Canada with the expectation of good future and settlement. Being an immigrant in Canada, he is kindly abetted by some of the natives. The policy of multiculturalism which enables the immigrants is quite obvious in the beginning of the novel. Although, it seems somewhat difficult to stay in Toronto in particular and Canada in general, the natives' aid comforts Atuk. He is obliged by natives like Rory Peel, Norman Gore, Bette Dolan and others.

Rory Peel, the brightest young Jewish advertising man in Toronto, praises his poetry. 'It's a gasser. A real gasser'(2). Rory's appreciation of Atuk's poem encourages him. The



financial and practical assistance to him, knowing his critical condition facilitates his stay in Canada and inspires him to live with dignity. He offers him two blankets, a sack of flour, his own cigarette lighter and twelve bars of chocolate in exchange of Atuk's poetry. The exchange of things seems like a business as multiculturalism promotes business. Canada is such a multicultural nation which provides the opportunity to nearly everyone. He speaks of freedom and growth that he enjoys in Canada where it is easily possible to develop and improve financially; moreover one can maintain the religious dignity. We have so very, very much to be grateful for, Rory thought. When I think I've risen above my father. In only one generation from cringing greenhorns in the slums to a relaxed, secure life in the suburbs. Amazing, on in Canada, he thought. (9)

Rory's conversation with Mr. Toby, the manager of the store reiterates the multicultural atmosphere in Canada. Rory's consideration towards the store of the Gentile, Mr. Toby as his own supermarket elucidates the attachment which is essential for the development of multicultural tie. The acceptance of guilt by Mr. Toby and expressing apology for not providing fresh roast enrich the respect for each other. Rory Peel's proposal to Atuk of Esky Enterprises with twenty-five per cent of benefit is a helping hand to him. Atuk says, 'we must love one another or die' (42).

Atuk is happily invited to a buffet dinner in which all sorts of people join the party organized by Professor Norman Gore.

The arts would be represented by Harry Snipes; Bette Dolan could speak for the body beautiful. Either Panofsky or Rabbi Glenn Seigal could account for the Jews, Atuk, for the Eskimo. Jean-Paul McEwen was coming and, all the way from Quebec City, an angry young priest, Father Anatole Forget. Seymour Bone would be there and so would Father Greg Touchdown Mckendrick, Derm Gebbard, and many, many more. (118,119)

The exceptional, unmatched in Toronto's cultural calendar Norman Gore's annual buffet dinner, embodies the multicultural indulgent of intellectual and cerebral community which



includes the self-esteemed people of all types who belong to various cultural ethnicities and share their views and express their opinions liberally. Atuk's contact with Rabbi Seigal, the religious man, leads him to study Yiddish and be the part of new religion.

Another man who steps forward to help Atuk is Norman Gore, the professor from Eglinton University. Earlier Gore advises him to go back to his native place to save himself from being corrupted in Canada. He tells him, 'You've had a quick success, so you think it's easy. Actually, the writer's path in this country is a thorny one'(4). Atuk's firm decision to stay in Toronto provides Norman to cite his multicultural behavior. Gore's co-operation to Atuk and to his poetry represents Canadian policy of multiculturalism. Whoever comes in Canada is respected. It is clear that though Atuk's poetry loses strength and power; still he is welcomed and appreciated. No one is looked down upon in Canada. In other words, everyone is accepted with his or her strengths and weaknesses. There are people like Gore and Rory to help the man like Atuk.

Gore's appointment as the president of the Canadian-Chinese Friendship Society explicates his nature of appreciation of other culture. The multicultural policy encourages Canadians to develop healthy and friendly relationship with Chinese people. It is Gore, who supports Atuk to get his poems published in the form a book and makes them popular with his remarks. His constant cooperation to Panofsky, Rory and others prepares the multicultural path to support Atuk. The internal social affection leads to external social attachment. The establishment of friendship, therefore, in society is prerequisite in a multicultural nation. Both of them plan the poetry reading. Atuk refers Norman Gore at the poetry reading function at the Cha-Cha-Chow-Mein Restaurant and acknowledges that he would be nothing without Norman's support. His acknowledgement marks the need of multicultural connection which directly or indirectly aids to flourish everybody in life. The good spirit that he speaks of in his poetry may be Canada or good people in Canada. This, the best loved poem written by Atuk, gets published in newspapers with the support of others. The poetry reading by the Eskimo becomes a significant historical day in Canada.



Norman guides him to be careful, if he wishes to do any business with any one of the Canadians. This suggests his desire that innocent Atuk should not be deceived by any one. He wants to know from him whether he is lending his name for Esky- products. Norman's taking care of Atuk explicates the multicultural philosophy. The people of opposite culture respect each other and Norman alerts him from being betrayed by anybody, though belonging to his own religion. Gore performs as a mentor for Atuk in Toronto. Norman Gore's annual buffet dinner has been an intellectual occasion unmatched on Toronto's cultural calendar. The conversation between Norman Gore and Panofsky on the healthy relationship with America explains again the need of multicultural bond. Panofsky asks him, 'Don't you think we ought to co-operate with the Americans?' (69) Gore, however, states the reality, 'Co-operation is one thing and domination is another. The trouble with those boys is they see commies under every bed' (69). The multicultural bond will only be possible if the both parties communicate properly.

The aid by Norman, Harry, Bette and others to Atuk, is reflection of Canadian multicultural policy. Norman Gore plans to send him to the editor of Metro magazine, Harry Snipes who happily welcomes him and offers him two books of poems. Harry's deep desire to establish the identity of Canadian magazine speaks of the purpose of Metro magazine. He says, 'We're fighting for our life here. We stand for a Canadian national identity and the American mags are trying to drive us out of business (5).

Bette Dolan, a Canadian TV star and heroine, is another lady who facilitates Atuk. As soon as, Bette Dolan becomes the first eighteen years old marathon swimmer to swim Lake Ontario in less than twenty hours, she becomes Canada's darling. She is inundated with many offers to endorse bathing suits, health foods, beauty lotions, chocolate bars. Her rejection of offers explicates her hatred for money. She says to the reporters, 'I did not swim the lake for personal gain. I wanted to show the world what a Canadian girl could do' (16, 17). She considers, it is her responsibility to help the needy people, especially like Atuk. Her attitude of helping other displays the multicultural philosophy. She happily donates the bulk of the prize money over to her town council to build a fantastically well-equipped gym for the crippled



children. She follows ‘give love and get love’ philosophy. All Canadians love her, she loves them all.

Bette Dolan’s remark of sameness notifies the equivalence among human beings of various races. She happily reveals her determination to aid him and to create confidence in him. She encourages him, ‘Some are bald – you have a head full of hair. Some are blind- you can see. Everybody envies somebody else. You must to learn to have faith in yourself’ (19). She reiterates her multicultural stand when Atuk asks him why she takes the trouble to help him. She replies, ‘Because I have to help people. That’s me’ (19). To her question whether he loves her, Atuk reacts, ‘Everybody loves Bette Dolan, so do I!’ (20) Her education to him about practicality in life develops their close relationship. His trust of her forces him to confess secretly the crime that he has done that is eating bones of American soldier in Tundra. Bette, though feels horrified, ensures him not to worry too much by suggesting him not to disclose the secret to anyone. She tells him, ‘The case is closed. You have nothing to worry about, darling’ (24).

The cross cultural bond reaches the mark of security which allows him to tell secretly the horrifying truth of his previous life. He feels comfortable and contented in her company. Bette conveys him the message of the body building coach, Dr. Burt Parks, ‘What you dare to dream, dare to do.’ Atuk wishes to prove his ability to everyone with the support of all these persons, although he has the vigor and strength to succeed in life. Atuk’s being closer to Goldie disturbs Bette Dolan. The differences in the multicultural relations make her uneasy. Atuk’s absence perturbs her.

Bette simply couldn’t sit still. She tried the parallel bars, but that didn’t work. Neither did the bicycle machine or the punching bag. She seemed to be driven by a surfeit of energy, an edginess she just could work off. Bette could not understand it. Even, swimming hardly pleased her any more. (89)

Dr. Parks’ multicultural view of equality is accessible. He admires Atuk for his behavior. He also encourages him and points out, ‘A college is a college; some college graduates end up digging ditches. It’s what you make of yourself that counts in this world, young fellow’ (30).



Like Bette Dolan, he also inspires Atuk to find the inner qualities in him. His remark to know yourself encourages him to lead life with courage. To create a healthy Canada, he guides and expects people to join his bodybuilding line and overcome all physical problems and diseases. He introduces one by one and appreciates a big muscular Negro, wearing dark glasses. The approval by people motivates the Negro to lift a huge weight. Dr. Parks says, 'Isn't he ...SENSATIONAL? He is blind – Meet Jersey Joe Marchette. THE WORLD'S BEST DEVELOPED... BLIND.... NEGRO! (27)The people follow deafening applause for the man. He is awarded with a big brass plaque. Dr. Parks, in honour to the Negro Jersey Joe, says he is an inspiration to us. It is therefore with great pleasure that I... give you this..... plaque (29). In an interview with a television reporter, Jersey Joe Marchette praises Canada and wishes to apply for Canadian citizenship. Jersey says, 'A Negro has a chance in this country, a decent and dignified chance. He used to be an actor. But they type-cast me in New York. I was strictly limited to coloured roles' (31). Dr. Parks' hard work for Negroes and Jersey's reaction of feeling homely in Canada reflect multicultural ideology.

Getting up early in the morning, setting out to work after having his breakfast is the implementation on the right path to become successful. Harry Snipe's idea of a television series with him is another aspect of multicultural relationship as it is the television business of the Canadian with the Eskimo. Atuk's wish to change his name and learn Yiddish speaks for the respect that he offers to Jewish people. The discussion between him and Rabbi Seigal elucidates his approach.

Atuk's love for Goldie Panofsky, the Jewish - plumped and rosy-cheeked daughter of Mr. Panofsky is out of similarity that he finds in her and other Eskimo girls. She also loves him though her father opposes her. In a discussion with his father, Atuk expresses his wish to marry non-Eskimo girl. His father is shocked and disturbed to listen to Atuk's decision of marrying out of race. His insistence on marrying the girl he loves- no matter for him whether the girl belongs to Eskimo tradition or not- is his yearning for launching the multicultural relation. Atuk is not rigid type of person. He loves his religion; however he does not want to be imprisoned by it. He easily accepts the new things that attract him, no matter whether they belong to his religion or



others. The discussion between them comprehends Atuk's multicultural stance. His pleading to his father to see the girl who is precisely fine, very fat and oily, like one of Eskimos is an appeal for the relationship between the various cultures. This addresses of equality in girls of both cultures. Atuk's defiance to hunting on Saturday is his love as well as his respect for her. It will be impossible for him because according girl's community Saturday is a day of rest, he says, 'You see their God,em, created the world in six days,and on the seventh day, Saturday, he rested'(85). The girl belongs to Jewish community and he compliments her tradition and culture. He tells his final decision to marry the girl and settle in Canada. He, however, expects the same co-operation and respect from her. He says, 'she will have to accept me as I am, an Eskimo' (88). The concept of multiculturalism expects the acceptance of other culture with its strengths and weaknesses.

Seymour Bone, a national figure and son of Presbyterian salesman abandons his native plain because his ideas, his style of life were considered too wildly bohemian by people there. He marries Ruthy Rosenthal, the daughter of Toronto pants manufacturer. The multicultural marriage is another example for the people in Canada. He marries her because, Bone hopes, this would prove his ultimate liberation from a provincial anti-Semitic family and he adores Jewish people. On Ruthy's part her marriage with him proves that she is not ghetto bound and she hopes to give a slap to her rigid family. Both try to overcome the prejudices of each other's lifestyle and religion. Their parents reacted against the marriage. Ruthy's father says, 'A mixed marriage can never work' (62). And Seymour's mother says to him, 'If you leave her we will forgive all and take you back' (62). They, nevertheless, continue to live together discarding their parents approach against cross culture marriage. As mentioned earlier, Richler supports such cross cultural marriages and comments that marriages between the same religions also do not work.

Richler depicts the multicultural ideology through another character that is Jean- Paul McEwen, the most fearless columnist in Toronto. Her writing projects the multicultural philosophy. She fights against racial prejudice and prepares a report on her racial prejudice survey. Her strong views regarding the differences demand equality and respect for every one reflects her multicultural ideology. The narrator observes:



Years ago when Jean-Paul McEwen, actually born Polly McEwen, decided to become a reporter, she resolved to take a man's name – for nobody in Canada would take a woman columnist seriously- and to sacrifice all personal pleasures or commitments to her pursuit of the truth. No marriage, no family. (103)

Jean-Paul McEwen's writing with the pseudonym of man displays the dissimilarity between men and women. She shows the world that she can write and even better than a man. Her struggle for the equality of men and women exhibits the multicultural philosophy. By deciding not to marry, she displays her independent identity which again one of the features of multiculturalism. She wishes the equal rights for all. She speaks strongly against the male domination in the society. She points out women's case.

You struggled, you worked, you won prizes and, you dared to hope, acceptance, but in the end it was still a man's world. We have been appeased; we have been mollified, but no more. They give us vote, equal pay in some industries, liberating appliances for the home, seats in government, and then they stop short. For some jobs it was still Men Only. (105)

As soon as, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrests Atuk with the charge that Atuk had eaten Colonel Swiggert's bones, nearly all Canadian stand in support of him. There are processions to back him up. Goldie, leading the procession, sings:

*It's a long way to the jailhouse,
it's a long way to go,
it's a long way to the jailhouse,
to the sweetest guy I know (162).*

Some of them are stunned to know that Atuk had made the crime and some others from Canada commiserate him. A housewife says, 'he has such a nice face', whereas a hospital dietician in Victoria observes, 'he must have been very hungry' (167). The cooperative stand by



some of the Canadians is reaction of aid to Atuk. Johnny Canuck, a CBC commentator points out that the accents differ, but the voice is the same. A psychologist from university of Toronto assesses, 'Atuk's act was one of symbolic revenge. Culturally, economically, the Americans are eating our whole country alive' (168). A western critic also proceeds in support of Atuk. According to him the poet that is Atuk is essentially a childish person. You can't apply normal standards of behavior to the creative ones (169).

The comments above mentioned do speak of the multicultural ideology. To save the life of an Eskimo, people in Canada come out strongly. American cars are wrecked, Coca-Cola signs are ripped out, and American books are burned on street corners. Not only that, Eskimo song is reprinted and Atuk Defense Fund is collected. Seeing Canadians support for Atuk, when Atuk is arrested, Gore excitedly states, 'Isn't it stupendous? I had thought our youth was dead. I didn't think anything could rouse them. It's wonderful, simply glorious. The response to Atuk's. Well, it takes me back' (161).

Besides, the Canadian magazines step forward to assist Atuk. The editorial writer of the 'Standard' writes, 'While we would be the last to condone cannibalism, we do feel that Atuk, a simple man, is a special case. US Army officers had no business in his land disturbing an age-old and time honoured way of life' (169). The headline of the magazine 'Gazette' HANDS OFF THE ESKIMO advocates a sympathy march for Atuk. The marchers shouted, 'We want Atuk! We want Atuk! (173). In addition to that the Canadian newspapers come out strongly to support Atuk. With all the help, he is moved and touched. He feels sorry for man against man.

Jean-Paul McEwen, the most fearless columnist in Toronto, does not allow herself to flow with other Canadians. She is a straightforward lady. She openly comes against Atuk. She says, 'To begin with I'd like to point out that I abhor everything American as much as the next, ah, man. The record speaks for itself. But we are going too far with Atuk. If he is guilty, and I have a witness to prove he is, then he must pay' (161).

The Canadians prop up to give him freedom to join the programme 'Stick Out Your Neck' under armed escort. After answering correctly two questions with the help of Twentyman,



Atuk fails to answer the third one. Then it is declared that Atuk is dead, when he undergoes the guillotines. Canada provides opportunities to many especially to minorities. Within no time, one can reach the peak; get financial safety and ethnic security in multicultural Canada. Rory allows a non-Jewish boy and engages other non-Jewish girls for the work. His nature demonstrates that he is free of prejudice for other religions. He gives a fine example of himself as a liberal Jew. As he is faithful to his religion, he is also faithful to others. He has reverence for every other woman. In a conversation with Bette Dolan, he feels proud to introduce himself as Jewish. Rory's co-operation to the Eskimo, Atuk, is nothing but multicultural co-operation. He admires Atuk and his work of poetry. He helps him to get them published through newspapers and to establish Atuk as significant poet in Toronto.

Mr. Panofsky's behavior also expresses such feeling of multicultural relations. In a talk with Norman Gore, Panofsky explains 'it's not that I'm an anti-Gentile' (7). At the same time he preserves his identity as Jew. When Norman Gore asks, 'you believe that Jews are different from other people?' Panofsky answers without any hesitation 'Absolutely' (123). Panofsky cares for others and also maintains his own identity. Some critics are of the opinion that *The Incomparable Atuk* is filled with satire on hypocritical nature of human beings. It is a comment on Atuk's nature and his desire to be called a well-known poet, although he does not deserves to be so.

According to Ada Craniford:

In this novel, satire clearly rules. All human frailty is held up to merciless ridicule... Atuk – with his criminal past, hygienic challenges, mediocre poetry, and inexplicable appeal to women- functions as an example of what Richler considered the abysmal taste in Canada at the time. That he himself was now being praised by a literary establishment he disdained caused Richler deep dismay. He therefore placed a straw man- an 'Eskimo' poet whom he could with impunity knock-down-in a family situation that parodied his own. (64, 65)



Amis Kingsley, the critic, comments:

Satire offers a social and moral contribution. A culture without satire is a culture without self-criticism and thus, ultimately, without humanity. A society such as ours, in which the forms of power are changing and multiplying, needs above all the restraining influences of savage laughter. Even if that influence at times seems negligible, the satirist's laughter is valid as a gesture – a gesture on the side of the reason. Satire in its modern form I take to be fiction that attacks vice and folly as manifested in the individual. (1957:1)

Set in Toronto and divided into three parts, the novel focuses the journey of the Eskimo from his innocence to become greedy one. With the help of Jean-Paul McEwen, Richler enjoys opportunity to attack hypocrisy and falsehood in the society. Some of the critics points out the writer's use of ironical title. The adjective incomparable in title increases the sarcastic significance of the character.

It is fact that Atuk is not a poet of quality, still he enjoys the popularity. What is more significant here in the multicultural context is the psychological as well as physical aid by others to Atuk to get settled in Canada. One cannot neglect multicultural encounters in the novel. The free and frank help to Atuk induces greed in his nature. As he gets easy way to become popular, his hunger increases.

Canada maintains its special identity from America. When Atuk is arrested by FBI, many Canadians make a huge cry, and organize movements, marches against America. If Atuk is guilty, Canada is able to punish him. This is reflected through the television show Stick Out Your Neck, where participants who answer incorrectly suffer the end through the guillotine. This symbolizes Canada's independent identity. And those who criticized Atuk during his arrest were considered favoring America. That is why Jean-Paul McEwen opposes Atuk, but she is blamed to have relatives in America. Though many critics consider *The Comparable Atuk* a satire; it is a fact that Canadian multiculturalism, that the novel discusses, has respected many minorities like Jews, Eskimos and others. It is this affection that tends Atuk to feel at home in Canada.



Therefore, an outsider Atuk loves to stay and find opportunities in Canada for his life. Toronto, with the aid of Rory Peel and Norman Gore, provides him name and fame, and which is probable in multicultural Canada.

Though, the novel carries satire and irony multiculturalism can easily be perceived. Richler probably makes fun of surface co-operation and expects real help to lead the life with peace and comfort for the people of minorities and others. When the Jewish-Canadian writer Mordecai Richler published the fiction *The Incomparable Atuk*, Canada had officially been independent domination for ninety six years. This was time when Canadians began to assess themselves critically who and what exactly they were. The issues of Canadianness and Canadian identity were hotly argued in the years that followed and Richler's book has to be seen in this framework. Canada ceased to be a British colony in 1867, but it had not really become economically, politically, culturally, and psychologically independent nation. Richler's *The Incomparable Atuk* is the representative of Canadian self and its relations with others.

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