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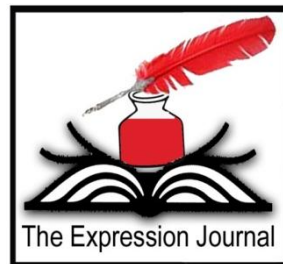
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PHILIP ROTH AS A TRUE ARTIST DEEPLY CONCERNED WITH JEWISHNESS IN AMERICA AND ITS CONCOMITANT PROBLEMS TO THE CORE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Philip Milton Roth was born on 19 March 1933 in Newark, New Jersey. His father Herman Roth was an insurance broker. He belonged to a Jewish family and his parents were the second generation Americans. He was a distinguished novelist who is well-known for the autobiographical elements and philosophical touch in his fiction. His fiction was marked by the distinction between the reality and fiction. He was well-known for his sensual and ingenious style. He has won many prestigious awards for which he is known as one of the most awarded American writers of his generation. His books twice received the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle award, and three times the PEN/Faulkner Award. He received a Pulitzer Prize for his 1997 novel *American Pastoral*. Another Zuckerman novel was awarded the United Kingdom's WH Smith Literary Award for the best book of the year. In 2001, Roth received the inaugural Franz Kafka Prize in Prague. The present paper attempts to trace the ambivalence of the American Jews and his struggle to overcome the crisis of being a Jew and an American at the same time, which is a major theme of Philip Roth and to project Roth as a true artist deeply concerned with Jewishness in America and its concomitant problems to the core and to show how Roth's criticism of his community is not the result of his hatred but his love for it and how he hates only those aspects of Jewishness practised by the modern American Jews which go against his ideal conception. His notable works are *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Zuckerman Bound*, *Operation Shylock*, etc.

Keywords

Philip Roth, Ambivalence, Problem, Criticism, Love, Jewishness, Ideal, Community, Immigrants, Autobiographical Elements, Identity.



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The ambivalence of the American Jew and his struggle to overcome the crisis of being a Jew and an American at the same time is a major theme of Philip Roth's fiction. Roth's Jews are more American than Jewish. Unlike Malamud whose characters, even if they are American Jews, seem to have been lifted directly from the European, Shtet. Roth picks up his characters from among the Jews of the Modern American Suburbs. Roth himself has remarked that Malamud's Jews in *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel* are "not the Jews of New York city or Chicago" but are a kind of "metaphor to stand for certain human possibilities". Roth goes on to accuse Malamud of not showing "specific interest in the anxieties and dilemmas and corruptions of modern American Jew" (Commentary 351). Without going into the merits or demerits of this accusation, it can be said that while Malamud appears to be writing mainly about Jewishness itself, Roth writes about the dilemmas that arise from the impact of two moral heritages and the problem of self-definition faced by multitudes of Jews in America.

Roth's criticism of this community is not the result of his hatred but his love for it. A reading of his articles, symposia and interviews reveals that Roth has a good deal of feeling and affection for the Jewish life. "I myself have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than my critics may begin to imagine" says Roth in an interview (24). He hates only those aspects of Jewishness practiced by the Modern American Jews which go against his ideal conception. If Roth appears to be bitterly critical about the middle class Jews of America, it is not because he is against them as such, but because of his closes sources and values. As a matter of fact, his writing of his closest sources and values. As a matter of fact, his writing constitutes the critique of the entire American society itself.

All leading characters in *Goodbye, Columbus*, *Letting Go* and Portnoy's Complaint are all men in the middle trying to reconcile the conflicting loyalties in them. Placed in a paradoxical situation and text by the dualities of past and present, emotion and intellect, tradition and modernism, they are forced to examine and define their selves. Neil, Ozzie, Marx, Epstein, Eli and Gabe are all men who, lacking any sure sense of values, are engaged in the search for identity.

Neil Klugman, the hero of *Goodbye, Columbus* fails to find any sustaining values 'either' in the Jewish experience or the American experience. Unable to commit himself to either the Jews or the Americans, he finds himself outside both the traditions and ends up as a man unsure of his place in the society and in the world. At the close of the story, after having failed to make a choice between the alternatives before him, he strands staring at his reflection in a library window with a desire to get behind it and find some "inside" information about the self. Ozzie Freedman's problems also arise as a result of his dual heritage. Failing to get a convincing explanation of the dogmas preached by the Jewish Rabbi, Ozzie rebels against his authority. In the process of exercising his individual mysterious "me" rushing toward the edge. Sergeant Nathan Marx is torn between his desire to be a good American soldier and his feeling of loyalty to his fellow - Jews. Although he defends himself against the mechanism of the Jewish recruit Grossbart, he is troubled by a suddenly awakened sense of identity. In the character of Eli, Roth has caught best the dilemma of the American Jew. As member of a modern American Community, he feels the strong pull of an orthodox Jewish community. The forces of assimilation and survival clash so violently in his personality that he is driven to a state of insanity. However, of all the characters in Roth's stories he comes nearest to a definition of his identity.

Letting Go shows how the duality experience and the resultant crisis has penetrated even the strong - hold of Jewish family life. Gabe Wallach is unable to live either in the world of his father or in his own world. That is to say, he can neither accept the past nor the present. The result is, like the rest of Roth's heroes, he dangles in the middle. By contrasting with the character of Paul, yet another dangling son, Roth has presented the two possibilities open for Jewish sons in America. The difference between the two characters is that while Gabe is unwilling to make a choice between the alternatives offered Paul makes his choice and regains his identity. Contrary to appearance that he is a Jews baiting all American hero, Portnoy, as shown in Chapter IV, is also an ambivalent figure. If on the one hand, he is pulled by the desire to satisfy all his sexual urges, on the other, he is not entirely insensitive to the urge to follow the traditional code of his parents. What he intensely desired is total rejection of Jewish tradition and total assimilation into the American mainstream.

Roth's Jewish characters are nominal Jews or in the words of Fieldler "restingial Jews who find the appearance in their mist of a Chasidic Jew, garbed and believed, quite as disturbing as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor found the returns of Christ...." (89-90). His characters seem to echo his own response to a symposium:

"I can't find a time and honest place in the history of believers that beings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on the basis of the heroism of these believers or of their humiliation and anguish...." (Roth in Commentary 351)

The Jews Roth writes about have lost touch with their past and tradition. They find little sustenance for them in the long history of suffering Jews. Not only have they adopted the external cultural signs of American majority but also have erased the memory of the God of Abraham and Isaac from their minds. Here is one of Roth's characters speaking:

"Sundays I drive my oldest kid all the way to Scarsdale to learn Bible stories.... And you know what she comes up with? This Abraham in the Bible was going to kill his own Kid, for a sacrifice.... Today a guy like that they'd lock him up." (*Goodbye* 200)

Roth's characters are highly assimilated Jews of whom many are in revolt against the Jewish system and the past which they think stifles their individuality. At the same time, this revolt

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against Jewish values is not total, for the same characters also find some positive elements in their heritage.

To consider Roth merely as a Jewish writer writing for Jews is to do great injustice to him. His concerns are humanistic rather than merely Jewish. He has very successfully managed to utilize the Jewish-American backgrounds as a fictional framework to explore the universal human condition. The dilemma of the Jews is indeed a part of a bigger universal dilemma. The Jew, therefore, is not the whole of Roth's concern even when he writes about him. The theme of alienation and the notion of identity is not linked to the Jew. In fact, it is deeply American theme made use of by most American writers. But it is a very crucial theme for the Jewish in America since they are caught between an American ethos and a deeper consciousness of the Jewish self and world. Roth as a truer artist simply dramatises the paradoxical situation without asserting any particular stance of his own. Whatever else one may observe about Roth, it is evident that he takes her Jewishness seriously since he is deeply concerned with the situation of a Jew in America and its concomitant problems.

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