

## **Philip Roth's Portrayal of Transformation of Jews from Proletarian Poverty to Middle Class Suburban Comfort and Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This article is an appraisal of Philip Roth as an adept in broadcasting the themes of Jewish transformation from proletarian immigrant poverty to middle class culture. The conflicts of American Jews existing between two sets of values, the American and the Jewish get projected in this paper as depicted by Philip Roth in his novels. This paper not only exposes the American Jewish experience but also picturizes the universal human condition. Thus this paper has successfully utilized the Jewish American background as a fictional framework to explore the universal human condition.

**Keywords:** Philip Roth, Judaism, suburban, immigrant, inhabitants, identify, dilemma, universal human condition.

What is considered as one of the most notable features of contemporary American literature is nothing but the emergence of “minority writing and writers” to the foreground, especially in the field of fiction. Two such groups of writers as the true spokesmen of mid-century America are “the Southern novelists and the Jewish writers” (Hassan 161). Despite the fact that another group of “minority writers” namely that of Negroes, had made its impact on the contemporary American literary scene, it is the Southern and the Jews who were considered to be the dominant groups. As Irving Malin puts it, the Jewish movement is “the only movement in twentieth century American literature as important as the ‘Southern Renaissance’” (P 3). As far as fiction is concerned, by the late sixties, the Southern novelists seem to have stepped aside in favour of the Jewish novelists. Tracing the social history of modern American literature, Walter Allen observes:

“... in the United States, it now seems as though the dominance of the South in the novel has largely passed to Jewish writers, through the best of whose work, the novels of Saul Bellow

and Bernard Malamud in particular, a recognizably new note has come into American fiction, not the less American for being unmistakably Jewish” (P xxii).

With the winning of the 1976 Noble Prize for literature by Saul Bellow the ascendancy of the Jewish group over the Southern group was found to be complete in all respects. Even though there were Jewish – American novelists of great distinction in the first two decades of this century, they did not gain as much prominence as the novelists of the thirties had. But even these novelists of the thirties could not enjoy the success and immense popularity enjoyed by the novelists of the sixties. Now, even in mid-seventies, the Jewish – American novelists continued to flourish. Among the present day Jewish writers in America, the major American novelists like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, J.D. Salinger, gained prominence in novel-writing. Other than those writers, a few other important American novelists among the Jews were Philip Roth, Herbert Gold, Leslie Fiedler who proved themselves to be eminent writers, out of whom Philip Roth is said to have created “an important body of work, a good deal of it of high critical as well as of popular acclaim” (Angoff 7).

Truly speaking, the American Jew is born between two sets of values – the American and the Jewish. Many noted American social thinkers started questioning the validity of values by pointing out that the American culture and society can be better served if the minorities are allowed to retain their identity and distinct culture. Americanization, according to Bogordes, means “giving the immigrant the best America has to offer and retaining for America the best in the immigrant” (Cohen 236). The survivalists among the Jews vehemently repudiate the idea of abandoning one’s group identity and cultural heritage. They assert that following one’s own religion or even fostering it is not against the spirit of American democracy. Morris Raphael Cohen in his book *Reflections of a Wandering Jew* states:

“The idea that all immigrants should wipe out their past and become simple imitations of the existing types is neither possible nor desirable. The past cannot be wiped out. And we make ourselves ridiculous in an effort to do so ... All great civilizations have been the result of the contribution of many people and a richer American culture can come only if the Jews like other elements are given a chance to develop under favourable conditions their peculiar genius” (P 240).

The Jewish-American writer like the typical American Jew experiences “the tension between the old and new generation, between Ghetto and suburb, bar mitzvah and little league baseball, synagogue and college, gabardine and ivy-league suit”. This tension spurs “the Jewish writer to an evaluation of his heritage as Jew, American and modern man” (Schulz 5-6). That is to say, he creates out of the experience of a modern American Jew not only a portrait of the American experience but also a picture of Universal human condition. The Jewish writer in America enjoys a special advantage over the rest of the modern American writers because of his marginal status. He is neither completely integrated in the society nor wholly alien to it. He is at once inside as well as outside, of both the American and the Jewish traditions.

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Philip Roth has certainly taken great advantage of this paradoxical situation to produce some highly popular and meritorious fiction. Writing about Roth, Guttman said:

“Of Jewish writers a generation younger than Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, he is the most talented, the most controversial and the most sensitive to the complexities of assimilation and the question of identity” (P 64).

The fact that he is a highly controversial writer became clear immediately after the publication of his first book *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) consisting of the title novella and five stories. While the literary critics showered generous praise over him, the theologians bitterly frowned on him. “What many writers spend a life-time searching for a unique voice a secure rhythm, a distinctive subject – seem to have come to Philip Roth totally and immediately” (Howe 17). Alfred Kazin praising him for his ‘toughness’ said thus:

“One catches the lampooning of our swollen and unreal American prosperity that are as observant and charming as Fitzgerald’s description of a long Island Party in 1925” (P 260).

If on the one hand, Roth received such excessive praise from the ordinary critics, on the other, he invited the wrath of the rabbis and the Jewish leaders. Ironically, it was the subject of Jewishness which landed Roth in the middle of a bitter controversy. As an artist, Roth had a right to say anything about the Jews that he honestly thought was true. He did maintain that the Jews were overly concerned with Gentile reactions. The solution to the problem of anti-semitism, he argues, did not rest in concealing their faults. On the other hand, it was better to dramatise them.

Quite undaunted by the criticism against his earlier work, Roth went ahead to write his first novel *Letting Go* (1962) with Jewish protagonists of course, Jewishness was not the only theme of this book. However, in this novel, Roth made certain valid comments on the Jewish family life in America, though not as satirical as his remarks in the stories of *Goodbye, Columbus*. *Letting Go* failed to receive as much popular response and critical acclaim as received by *Goodbye, Columbus*. After a gap of five years, Roth wrote *When She Was Good* (1967), a novel purely about Gentiles, perhaps to prove that he could write as well about non-Jews or perhaps prompted by a desire to be considered as an American writer, writing for American. This novel of Roth received hardly any notice at the hands of either the critics or the general readers.

Roth’s next novel *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) was quite another matter. Eagerly awaited, this book became a runaway success. After gap of three years, Roth wrote three novels in quick succession: *Our Gang* (1972), a political satire on the Nixon Administration, *The Breast* (1972), a confused novel about the transformation of a man into a breast, and *The Great American Novel* (1973), modeled on the American baseball fiction. In none of these three novels is Roth concerned with Jewishness. “Roth’s natural subject”, according to Kazin, is “the self-conscious Jew, newly middle class, the Jew whose ‘identity’ though never in doubt is a problem to himself” (P 144). All

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the leading characters of his Jewish fiction. *Goodbye, Columbus, Letting Go* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, belong to the middle and upper – middle class Jews of the suburbs with “the finest eye for the details of American life, Roth describes every minute detail of American life.

Generally speaking, Roth's Jewish fiction gives the reader an insider's view of the anxieties, tensions and problems of the Jewish – American life. While writing about his fellow Jews, Roth does not adhere to the dictum that a writer must owe a certain allegiance to his tribe. Believing in the artistic integrity of a writer, he “castes a cold eye on Jews as a group” (Kazin 145). In his stories and novels, he satirises the suburban Jews for their obsession with material wealth and the consequent corruption of values. Sometimes, the satirical tone becomes deprecatory. Nevertheless, Roth's Jewish fiction reflects the dilemma of the Jew in America. The conflict between the Jew and the American figures vary prominently in his fiction. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, his first and to date, the only collection of short stories, Roth dealt with the lives of the middle and upper-middle class Jews of the suburbs. While the spokesmen of Jewish community and religion denounced him for presenting an unfair and negative view of Jewish life, the literary critics praised him for his true portrayal of American suburban life. But these critics were content to look at him only as a “prodigious observer of a special sub-culture” (Lear 132).

Irving Howe reviewing the book said that Roth's depiction of the suburban world was “ferociously exalt”. According to him, Roth succeeded in presenting the theme of the transformation of Jews “from proletarian immigrant poverty to middle class suburban comfort, which has all too often meant from tragic – comic intensities to a dreary slackness” (Howe 17). Bellow, too, struck the same note when he observed that it was the change that had been brought about by assimilation which was the real subject of Roth's stories.

Kazin praised Roth for his “toughness” but he too seemed to conclude that the portrayal of Patimkin manners and morals was more important than the love affair in the title story. There is no denying the fact that Roth describes with exact accuracy the life of the Jewish inhabitants of the Suburbs, but to consider him merely as a close observer of this culture is highly unfair. There is more in his writings than the mere depiction middle-class suburban culture. His characters threatened by the onslaught of American ethos, face up to their own identities. Thus, what is central to these stories is Roth's endeavour to present the specific tensions and dilemmas in Jewish suburban life arising out of the dual heritage of the American Jews.

No doubt, Roth's long story “Goodbye, Columbus” has often been read as a satirical social commentary on the life of the suburban Jews. However, a close reading of the story suggests that Roth in writing this story is concerned not so much with satirising the vulgar ways of the suburban Jews, as with presenting the paradoxical life of the Jew in post-war America. As in other stories, Roth is seized of the problem of identity here too. Neil Klugman, the youthful hero, dangles between two groups of Jews in search of his identity. He is neither here nor there, unable to conform to either of the groups. This does obviously constitute his dilemma. Neil works in a public library in Newark and lives with his Aunt Gladys since his parents have gone to Arizona for reasons of health.

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During the summer, he meets Brenda Patimkin of Short Hills and a romance develop between them. The two worlds between which Neil hangs are those of Aunt Gladys and the Patimkins. Newark and Short Hills represent two opposite positions on the integration – survival scale. Malin says that “they conveniently stand for past and present” (P 78). The Patimkin’s have travelled the path of riches from Newark to Short Hills because of the phenomenal rise in the sale of their sinks during the war years when “no new barrack was complete until it had a squad of Patimkin sinks lined up in its latrine” (P 30). Through this extraordinary sale, the Patimkins grow wealthy enough to move to the suburban heights of Short Hills. Roth here exposes the vulgar materialism of the suburban Jews through the Patimkins and their way of life.

The manner in which Roth has drawn the love affair between Neil and Brenda does not make it difficult for the reader to accept Neil’s rejection of Brenda. Although he is attracted towards Brenda, his love for her does not seem to be deep-rooted. Even Brenda does not seem to be sincere about her love since she very callously leaves the diaphragm at home. Their love through summer is just a pretension and proceeds purely on a physical level with both trying to escape any commitment. That is why Neil proposes a diaphragm instead of marriage, and Brenda easily succumbs to the demands of her parents. Their love, in fact, is nurtured out of a dissatisfaction with their live. While Neil feels an outsider in his home, Brenda too does not feel at ease in her home. Neil’s rejection of Brenda is significant in that it means his rejection of the Patimkin values which largely happen to be American.

“The Conversion of the Jews” is yet another story which deals with the struggle of the protagonist to reconcile the contradictory demands of being an American on the one hand and a Jew on the other. The conflicting loyalties of the modern American Jew is the subject matter of Roth’s next story “Defender of Faith”, which is, at once, one of the most praised and attacked of his stories. Roth himself has observed that “it is about one man, who uses his own religion, and another’s uncertain conscience, for selfish ends; but mostly it is about this other man, the narrator, who because of the ambiguities of being a member of his particular religion, is involved in a taxing, if mistaken, conflict of loyalties” (Roth 36).

While the “Defender of the Faith” describes a scheming Jew who exploits to the fullest possible extent his religion in order to gain selfish ends, the next story “Epstein” portrays a middle-aged Jew who is an unfortunate victim of circumstances. “Epstein” has caused a great deal of resentment among the rabbis. What has irked them is that Roth has made a sympathetic character out of an immoral Jew. In *Epstein*, Roth has created a tragic figure who is desperately trying to adjust himself to time. The last but the most important story of *Goodbye, Columbus*, “Eli, the Fanatic” deals with two groups of Jews occupying two extreme points on the integration – survival continuum. While the extreme integration position is represented by the Woodonton. Jews, the extreme survival position is represented by the Jews of Yes Livah. Roth’s chief concern in this story, as in other stories, is to throw light on the struggle of the protagonist to reconcile the two positions. All the leading characters of the stories analysed here are ambivalent figures. In spite of

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their best efforts, they are unable to find a solution to their problems. Their dilemma, in fact, cannot be resolved until they gain a sure sense of their identities. Hence all of them wander in quest of their identities. The fact that Roth has consistently chosen such dangling man as his characters throws ample light on his own dilemma as a Jewish – American writer caught between two worlds.

To conclude, it may be said that Roth's concerned are humanistic rather than merely Jewish. He has very successfully managed to utilise the Jewish-American background as a fictional framework to explore the universal human condition. The dilemma of the Jew is, in fact, a part of a bigger universal dilemma. Roth as a true 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 his Jewishness seriously since he is deeply concerned with the situation of a Jew in America and its concomitant problems.

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