



## PHILIP ROTH –A WRITER WHO SPEAKS HIS MIND

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The beginning of the civilization in America could be traced to the establishment of colonies in the new land. The settlers from European countries at last had started their new life from here. The Black people from Africa also joined them, but they did not assimilate into the culture so easily. The Puritans settled in the new land, especially in areas like Massachusetts and Connecticut. They preached the gospel seriously and condemned sins. They believed in rigorous self-discipline and hard work. This seriousness and morality came to be known as New England consciousness.

In America there was a need for original expression of ideas and experience pertaining to the new land. Based on the influences of writers from Greece, Rome and England, new currents have their own impact on the artists of this new country. In the twentieth century the United States of America showed its real maturity, The First World War originated in Europe (1914-1918) brought an awakening that democracy should strengthen the spirit of vitality and non-interference in others' affairs. Imperialism in any form was opposed.

The 'USA Today' news in 2014 read three lessons learned from WWI: Exhaust diplomacy before using force, War is always unpredictable, and History should be remembered.

The Second World War (1939-1945) changed the political alignment and social structure of the world.

"The literary historian Malcolm Cowley described the years between the two world wars as a second flowering of American writing. Truly American literature came of age and in its wake a new variety could be seen in the 1920s and 1930s. American literature in Transition, 1920-1930 examines the interaction between social and literary fields. Writers like Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, O'Neil, Robert Frost, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner were publishing their great works during their period.

Significant works by several major writers were published after 1945. Henry Miller's fiction was brilliant because of its frank exploration of sexuality. It goes without saying that the loose, picaresque and quasi-autobiographical form coincided with the post-1960s fiction. A new generation of novelists with ethnic, regional and social character emerged from the preceding type of literature. Among the younger generation writers there came into existence the children of immigrants, the Jews, the African-Americans and women with feminist labels attached to them. In literature two forms, namely short story and fiction became popular in the early part of the twentieth century. The scientific horror of the Second World War brought in the changes in the respective cultures among the people of different sects.

The most prolific period in American literature emerged when the government started loosening the immigration restrictions in the mid-1960s. The stage was set for the rich multicultural setting in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. New Jewish voices were heard on the fiction of E.L. Doctorow and Cynthia Ozick. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the younger Jewish writers from the erstwhile Soviet Union dealt impressively with the experience of immigrants in the United States. The question of assimilation and solidarity with the country in which the immigrants find themselves ultimately arises increasingly, as the world passes through different stages in the fields of politics, social life, scientific development and economic welfare. Certainly problems creep up in the assimilation stage and the incumbents are left with options to be passed on to those who are anxious to stick to their own traditions. It is in such a set up the Jewish writer Philip Roth has come out with his fiction embodying therein the kind of features that comes in for investigation. The objective of the paper is to present Philip Roth as a writer who speaks his mind. Most of his fiction is narrated through an array of alter ego. Jewish-American novels examine a multitude of topics; religion, immigration, family, responsibility, love, culture, tradition, and place.

Philip Roth (1933-2018) was born on 19 March, 1933, is a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century American novelist and short story writer. His career spans over four decades and in this period he has written nearly thirty books, exploring in them the complexities of being a middle class Jew in modern America. His fictional world takes its range from realistic and serious presentation to the surreal and socio-cultural adventures. In his novels his protagonists defend themselves in their struggle for an identity of their own. In his writings he uses the elements of wit, irony, satire and caustic humor "both to celebrate and transcend 'the Jewish question.'" He still manages to write about what causes people pain and to explore very serious, universal concerns. He ruminates on what it's like to be a young, male, middle class Jewish and sexually intellectual person in contemporary America. Soon enough he has come to be classed with Saul Bellow and John Updike among the top three American writers of



the past half century. He has reached this stage through the accumulation of small works – each presenting narrow, intense, sometimes political, often hilarious, customarily an unwelcome examination of one or a few aspects of life.

Roth's first book, *Goodbye, Columbus: and Five Short Stories* (1959) drew criticism saying that he was a 'self-hating Jew.' *Goodbye, Columbus* is a novella, about a working class Jewish kid in New Jersey. He tries to win the favor of his rich Jewish girl friend's family. Of the five stories in the collection, the first one 'The Conversion of the Jews' shows a thirteen year old boy questioning the Jewish orthodoxy and going at length to convince his community to accept Christianity. The second title 'Defender of the Faith' is narrated by an army sergeant who struggles with a group of soldiers trying to extract favors from him and thus showing solidarity among them. The other three stories too have the same pattern of Christian versus Jewish practices and ways of life.

That controversy regarding his Jewish orientation reached a feverish pitch with his novel *Portnoy's Complaint*, which created a sensation in 1969 because of its explicit recounting of a young lawyer's sexual autobiography, consisting largely of compulsive attempts to free himself from the strict confines of his Jewish upbringing through incessant masturbation and sexual conquest.

Since then, Roth's output has ranged from wild comedy and political satire to examinations of his role as a writer. Also he deals with meta-fictional explorations of the relationship between art and life, fiction and reality, imagination and fact. He himself calls it as the relationship between the written and the unwritten world. In an interview with Mervyn Rothstein for the *New York Times* (August 1, 1985), Roth identified his primary theme as "the tension between license and restraint, a struggle between the hunger for personal liberty and the forces of inhibition" (27).

In the late 50s and 60s, Philip Roth produced some of his best works. Among these were the memoir *Patrimony* (1991), *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (1993), and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), which won the National Book Award for fiction. Roth's trilogy of modern American life began in 1997 with *American Pastoral*, which covers the Vietnam era; continued in 1998 with *I Married a Communist*, a look at the Red Scare of the 1950s; and concluded in 2000 with *The Human Stain*, a critique of America's obsession with moralizing and political correctness. For *American Pastoral* he earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. Over the next decade Roth's published works included *The Dying Animal* (2001), *The Plot against America* (2004), *Everyman* (2006), *Exit Ghost* (2007), and *Indignation* (2008).

By now Roth has become an accepted author with a special focus on ethnicity. In the novel *The Plot against America* the novelist goes down memory lane and thus visualizes his being a child in an atmosphere that is anti-Semitic. But in *The Human Chain* the novelist gives up his racial identity and instead takes up the sexual question. While his early works seem to have been liberated in their depiction of sexual interest, the later ones get themselves restricted to the intimate aspirations leading to close relationships with the other sex. In his later career Roth makes his fictional alter ego Zuckerman impotent which is made clear through his novel *American Pastoral*.

Roth chose death as the focus of his 2006 novel, *Everyman*, after witnessing many of his friends grow old and die. The story centers on the life, slow decay, and eventual death of the unnamed main character. The events of his life appear out of sequence and are presented as increasingly common and universal. Describing *Everyman* as "essentially a medical biography," James Poniewozik wrote for *Time* (May 15, 2006), "It is to Roth's credit that he cannot quite bring himself to write a book as dull and flat as *Everyman's* concept seems to demand. His style repeatedly breaks its limit, as at the funeral, when the protagonist's brother gives a moving eulogy and his estranged son struggles violently against unbidden grief." (45). That book won him a 2007 PEN/Faulkner Award, making him the award's only three-time winner. Roth was also honored with a PEN/Nabokov Award for lifetime achievement and a 2007 PEN/Saul Bellow Award for achievement in American fiction. In 2007 Roth published *Exit Ghost*, the ninth book narrated by Zuckerman, which finds Roth's alter-ego, now aged 71, in search of a New York specialist to perform surgery to treat his incontinence and impotence and wishing for a well-endowed 30-year-old short-story writer.

In 2008 Roth published *Indignation*, a novel whose main character, the Newark-born Marcus Messner, flees his overprotective father during the Korean War and transfers to Winesburg College, in Ohio, in an effort to emulate the preppy students. Characterized by reviewer Rita D. Jacobs for *World Literature Today* (November 1, 2008) as a return to "his roots" the book examines the familiar subjects of identity, sex, and death. In February 2009 Houghton Mifflin announced the expected publication dates for Roth's next two novels. *The Humbling* was scheduled to be published in the fall of 2009 and saw the exploration of the unexpected sexual awakening of an aging stage actor; and *Nemesis*, which has a 2010 publication date, recounts a polio epidemic in World War II-era Newark. This dissertation takes up for investigation the theme of solidarity in the select novels of Philip Roth, namely *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*, *The Ghost Writer* and *Exit Ghost*.



Since Philip Roth belongs to a community and is interested in espousing the cause of the Jews and their ways of life through his novels, it becomes pertinent to make reference to the Diasporic literature before going into the detailed analysis of the said novels of Roth. The term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb, 'diaspeiro.' It began to develop from this original sense when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. So after the Bible translation into Greek, this word has come to be used to refer to the Northern Kingdom exiled between 740-722 BC from Israel by the Assyrians as well as the Jews. In the same manner the Benjaminites and Levites were exiled from the Southern Kingdom in 587 BC by the Babylonians. It subsequently came to be used refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel and to the cultural development of that population. The term 'Diaspora' itself would mean a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographic locale. Originally it referred to the Jewish Diaspora, indicating the dispersal of the Jews from Israel back in the sixth century BC and later in the second century AD from Jerusalem. It also refers to the movement of the population from its original homeland to a new place of one's choice. It has now come to refer particularly to the historical mass dispersion of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of the Jews from Judea and the fleeing of the Greeks after the fall of Constantinople. Other examples include the African Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the exodus of Irish during and after the Irish Famine, the Palestinian Diaspora and the Jewish exodus from the Arab and Muslim countries in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As for the Jewish American literature, it can be unanimously agreed that the Jews have had many Diasporas and the feeling of their homeland culture. They stress on the social equality and their immigrant past in order to be made known to all Americans. These texts served to keep open the door to the United States and "to reaffirm loyalty to the American creed and stress the willingness of all Eastern European immigrants to fully integrate into the mainstream of white Anglo-Saxon protestant American society" (Spevack, 32).

The situation and position of the Jewish American writer has always been different from that of the other populations in America and it is so even now. A comparison with the African-American writers will show this difference clearly. Though the marginal position of the black authors has vanished from the country, the themes of alienation and anger still persists in their works.

Since the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the black authors wished to have their own forms of literary expression and establish trends in separatism and cultural resistance. If there is no sense of success or even desirability of social and cultural integration into the white mainstream of American society on the part of the African-American writers, many Jewish-American authors felt it as necessary and desirable and even went to the extent of acquiring it. In this context it may be clearly seen that a great number of contemporary Jewish-American writers like Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Miller, Philip Roth and others have had literary achievement. The language of these writers is standard American English. Their works are socially accepted and read by a wide circle of both Jewish and non-Jewish audience. They are now part of the American mainstream writings. But the fact remains that the Jewish-American literary productions are shaped by strong ethnic forces and they stand out as distinct entities in the multicultural American landscape.

The first phase of Jewish American presence in American literature starts with the arrival of Jewish immigrants on the American soil in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It continues up to the 1880s, to be followed by 'the Great Tide' from 1880 to 1924. From then onwards it has been a steady advance of Jewish American writers on Broadway, in Hollywood, in broadcasting network and into the country's literary mainstream. In the eyes of the literary world, this tradition starts with Philip Roth, Malamud and Saul Bellow. As part of this culminating achievement, the phenomenon of self-meditation about the Jewish identity in America emerged. It includes all that is part of literature as also the Holocaust literature. This latter trend refers to the division of culture into a pre-and a post-Holocaust type. Written in many languages, this literature is paradigmatic. It stresses the fact that no field of human activity is untouched by the killing of the Jews. The flames of the cruel fight fought during the two World Wars reveal the stark truth that culture is no shield against murder. Initially in the early 1960s a few survivors of the Holocaust wrote about their experiences. With the passage of time and the increase in historical analyses, the writers began to turn their attention to the several implications of the terrible warfare.

Both genres, Jewish American literature and Holocaust literature, undergo a process of renewal. The writers like Max Apple, Rosellen Brown, Helen Epstein, Ruth Feldman, Rebecca Goldstein, Marge Piercy, Adrien Rich and others have extended and enriched these genres in significant ways. The editors of *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*, Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport reveal the breadth and depth of both Jewish American and Holocaust literatures. They have observed that "in rescuing the Holocaust from the banality of repetition, these stories from writers of diverse background provide another indication of the fresh winds of imagination that blow from various sectors of the Jewish scene" (xxiii). Regarding the Holocaust, Yosef Havim Yerushalmi writes in *Zachor* that more has been written on the Shoah than on any other historical event in Judaism. According to him, the image of the Holocaust "is being shaped not at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible" (98).



There are two main reasons, How Roth deals with this problem? First of all, it is a fact that, as much as they tried to ingratiate themselves with the white mainstream majority, the Jewish Americans just like any other ethnic writers have an acute “sense of doubleness, a double consciousness” (Sollors, 243). They confront an actual or imagined double audience, composed of ‘insiders’ and of readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the author’s ethnic group, from both of whom they must have felt alienated at times. This sense is widely pervasive in their work and it differentiates them from other mainstream writers who are ‘single-consciousness’.

His range is limited and his sympathies narrow but for a half-century Philip Roth has told us much about what it is to be alive in America.

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