



Philip Roth : The Sentimental Jew

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Abstract

Jewish American Literature has emerged as enunciating new patterns of existence. Significantly, from the 1960s, Jewish American Literature has taken a new direction owing to the multicultural pressures. Multiculturalilty is one important factor. It created a multicultural perception in life, which ultimately was reflected in Literature in the 70s. The writers who emerged on the scene during this epoch witnessed a mass cultural change. This was one change, which not only influenced life and Literature but also contested the cultural patterns. The challenges that issued forth owing to the encounter of a new cultural factor called hybridity brought in a new kind of dispute in the literary arena. The present paper tries to analyse PHILIP ROTH : THE SENTIMENTAL JEW

Key words:

Jewish American Literature, Philip Roth, Multiculturality, Jewish Humanism, Jewish Literature.

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practices were questioned. This led to a culture conflict. The decades that followed the 70s summarily condensed the precepts of life into an anarchic whole. There was a kind of projection that the cosmos was qualified by a multicultural ethics.

The Jewish American literature has chronicled and paralleled the Jewish American experience. It depicts the struggles of immigrant life, the stable yet alienated middle-class existence that followed, and finally the unique challenges of cultural acceptance: assimilation and the reawakening of tradition. The Jewish-American literature speaks of the dreams and aspirations of the immigrant Jewish people, passionately seeking a homeland of their own. It draws heavily from the immigrant experience and memories. It gives an account of the struggle between fathers and sons and their ideologies due to the modern revolution and describes the lives of the people caught up between past and present, religion and freedom, and about seeking transcendence through humanism and not by God. It speaks about the individual in the face of duality, history, suffering and ultimately transcendence. Further, it deals with the individual suffering and the dualities which include acceptance and rejection of God. It corresponds to Romantic literature as opposed to Classical, and it is spontaneous, self-assertive, egotistical, and undisciplined.

A list of all the American - Jewish writers who have contributed to American literature since 1945 cannot be presented here. It is far too long and would involve a discussion of a whole social movement with far reaching consequences for American culture. Some of the most prominent names among the American-Jewish fiction writers are of course Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Tillie Olson, Grace Paley, Cynthia Ozick, Herbert Gold, Joseph Heller, E.L. Doctorow, Stanley Elkin, Hugh Nissensen and Phillip Roth. The works of Phillip Roth are undoubtedly excellent examples of the rejection of traditional Judaism already exhibited by the Yiddish writers a generation earlier. Like their non-Jewish contemporaries and predecessors, the Jewish writers in the last half of the 20th century contributed a great deal to the secularization of America and Jewish life as well as they created a distinction between Judaism and Jewishness



which their grandparents never knew and which has become the Great Divide within the Jewish community in the twenty-first century.

Roth and his contemporaries, particularly his Jewish companions, sought to now attack the core of Jewishness as they understood it. This Jewishness, in the hands of these writers, consists of being raving hysterics, nagging Jewish mothers, and female shrews of every variety. Thus, the popular Jewish writers in the tradition of Roth were accused of being Jewish anti-Semitic, producers of filth and self-hatred and conveyors of the same calumnies which the Jews of the old world endured for so long. Roth is the great chronicler of the second-generation American Jewry. His characters, by and large, are the children of those Jews who worked their tails off to enter the middle class and do not intend on letting their children forget it. Roth writes about the Jews who are financially comfortable yet culturally adrift. The novels of Philip Roth throw light on the Jewish American culture and the significant elements which formed the basis for the evolution of its character. Indeed, a great number of contemporary Jewish-American writers such as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Miller, Philip Roth and others have had literary success. The language employed by these writers is standard American English, they are socially accepted, and their works are read by a wide Jewish and non-Jewish audience. For this reason it is widely considered that their texts form part of a recognized literary canon, and belong to the American literary centre or mainstream, as far as this may still be defined today. As much as we agreed to this idea we cannot ignore several facts which underline the necessity to view Jewish American literary productions as shaped by strong ethnic forces, and Jewish American literature as both belonging to and standing out in the multicultural American landscape.

For Roth, his fictions are an illustration of a new perceptual thinking which negotiates with the materialist contemporariness. Also the fictions demonstrate configurations of the oppressive doctrines thrust upon by the transnational superstructure. His fictions again plow through the sticky culturality trying to clinch a new dialectic. And that dialectic is humanist enlightenment and even human freedom from the nightmarish faces. Specifically the novels



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selected for study help one to identify the modern politics which betrays the human anarchy. To Roth the issue of humanism should not stay isolated but ideologically and contextually found to the text. This is his concern. Roth has intruded upon the pages of the novel bringing into context those events of history which not only has impaired the Jewish history but also has terribly scandalized the Jewish consciousness. The Jew is fixed on the cross externally cursed to carry the cross into the annals of Jewish history.

Roth's novels generate landscape culturality as they have been fixed in the Jewish community. The landscape is constituted by the unimpassioned Judaism. Women in the families portrayed by Roth in his novels are pressurized by the urban post structural signs characterized by male chauvinism. It becomes imperative that a woman has to place herself in the position of a contestant and not as a cultural participant. Marital incompatibility comes as one dominant cultural sign, which posits the essential principle of subjugation in women. Further, the Jewish male is an oppressive factor in a marital construct. He enacts upon his woman a disinterested logic.

Roth's novel generates landscape culturality as they have been fixed in America's Jewish settings. The Jewish community is constituted by the unimpassioned Jewishness. Jews in the community has been pressurized by the non Jewish ethnic society. It becomes very much imperative that a Jew has to place themselves in the position of a foreigner and not as an American. For instance, in *Nemesis*, when Bucky Cantor along with the boys are playing the Jewish community in Newark, a group of Italian boys come and spit saliva at them and tell the Jewish boys that that place was not for Jew children. Hence the Jewish characters in the novels of Philip Roth have to adapt to a few potential strategies in order to forge for themselves an identity. Marital incompatibility comes as one dominant cultural sign which persists the essential principle of subjugation in Jews.

Roth in his writings advocates absolute equality for both Jews and non Jews in America. He stresses the fact that Jews ought not to allow themselves to be exploited by patriarchal structures. On the other hand, Roth highlights the destructive effects of patriarchal cultural on



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human beings. Through his novels Roth brings out the pathetic condition of the Jews and especially the protagonists. The protagonists of Roth are found to be very weak in their character and they always have a fighting spirit. One would rather tell that Roth's characters are pessimistic than optimistic. They come across various problems which are either created by themselves or by the society or even by the members of their own family. The protagonists of Roth are sensitive and hyper emotional in character. Philip Roth has unanimously attempted to define the role of the Jew as an inactive, dependent and weak character.

Roth's fiction is a play on the solitary experience of the artist with history. His fiction refashions events into components of literary grace. It operates as figure of a free single text which also betrays his self. Further Roth fiction is reactive against the emerging multiculturalilty of the present scenarios. At the same time it also attempts to eliminate the Hegelian perception of the German ideology. One fascinating factor of Roth's fiction is his significant creation of a sarcastic historicist literature which attempts to replace the primary assumptions of humanism. Again his fiction attempts to deconstruct culture through the creation of human relationship, space and time. In one sense, his fiction is a determining force to negotiate the depressing without to human activity.

Work Cited

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