



The Race And The Milieu: Philip Roth's Fiction

E.STELLA, M.A., B.Ed.,
Research Scholar,
St. John's College,
Palayamkottai.

Abstract

Jewish American Literature has explained and revealed the Jewish American life and its societal experience. It depicts the struggles of immigrant life, the stable yet alienated middle class existence that followed. The present paper tries to analyse the race and the milieu in Philip Roth's Fiction.

Key words:

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

Jewish American Literature has explained and revealed the Jewish American life and its societal experience. It depicts the struggles of immigrant life, the stable yet alienated middle class existence that followed. On the other hand it also portrays the unique challenges of cultural acceptance. Jewish American literature is now only about a century old if we include that literature which was written in Yiddish by immigrants between 1885 and 1935. The established view is that, as with other Jewish languages. Jews speaking distinct languages learned new co-territorial vernaculars, which they then Judaized. Yiddish, however is rarely used in America at the beginning of the 21st century so that anything foreign except some of the works of the Goethe and Voltaire has no influence on the American Jew simply because they cannot read it. There are many works of literature that depict the life of the Jewish immigrant. The first Jewish novels written in America was written by immigrants. There were of course innumerable other authors but only a few stand out as major contributors to Yiddish writing in the U.S.A

Suffering is an inevitable part of Jewish sensibility. Like his compatriots Philip Roth has been fascinated by the theme of Jewish suffering that shapes Jewish sensibility. In fact, it is this fact of human nature that has affected greatly the molding of Jewish sensibility. Suffering is one of the prominent qualities of Jewishness. A survey of Jewish history is one



of wandering and suffering. The Jew is always on the move, accompanied by suffering, both mental and physical. This suffering continues even today. Its worst phase was in the early forties of the previous century when Adolph Hitler embarked upon a mad adventure of extermination that caused the death of six million Jews.

The Jewish experience throughout the ages have provided them with an extraordinary resilience and tenacity to maintain their ethnic identity successfully in their arduous struggle for survival. Constant suffering has fostered the values of compassion and charity in Jews. Thus suffering obviously has a special meaning to the Jews. It is not surprising to note that the Jewish audience is receptive to the relentless pageant of Jewish suffering in literature. A family pride springing from two sources goes with it. Suffering is first of all the distinguishing mark of the Jewish people. It is also a part of that which demarcates them as the Chosen People.

Judaism is both parochial and universal at one and the same time. Rituals are grounded in the experience of the Jewish people and the teachings cannot simply be adopted by or grafted on to some other group delinked from Jewish history and life. Within Judaism itself, the advocates of assimilation and xenophobia have not been able to arrive at a compromise. The making of the self is related to the theme of alienation and is an important subject particularly in the American context. Of all the varied cultural and subcultural groups, the Jews and Blacks have been the most affected, dissolving themselves in the melting pot that America is.

Philip Roth, who does not view the story of the Chosen People with sympathy has steered clear of fictionalizing sentiments. Like Malamud, Roth too asserts that all men in the world suffer from various misfortunes like the Jews. Jews alone are not prone to suffering, pain, sorrow and misfortune. Transcending himself the rigid parameters of being labeled a 'Jewish writer', Roth looks upon suffering as a way towards man's ennoblement and enlightenment. With the advent and advancement of materialism, man has become lonely in a crowd, a depersonalized creature, a victim of modern technology whose individual identity gets lost in the image of a mob. It is this image of an isolated man and his sensibility that has been portrayed in the fiction of Philip Roth, especially his early fiction. The characters wander in the dark, trying to redeem themselves. Ultimately they gain a foothold and in the process, preserve their identity. The message is clear: Self-indulgence seems to erode loyalty,



respect and responsibility, which are the cornerstones of stable families. Malamud's opinion that all men are Jews has been expanded in its connotative sense by Philip Roth to conclude that all Jews are destined to suffer and any sufferer is a Jew. All sufferers are Jews and vice-versa. All humanity is destined to suffer and all of them have imbibed the Jewish quality of suffering. According to Roth, suffering is not the exclusive prerogative of Jews.

The Jew as a concept has become a metaphor. Philip Roth's arrival on the literary scene - especially as a fiction writer - and his image zooming upwards had much to do with the state of American Jewry in the fifties of the twentieth century. Post-war Jewry, yet to recover from the shock of the Holocaust, was obsessed with Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the dramatic version of Anne Frank's *Diary* and Leon Uris's *Exodus*. Even while trying to forget the past, the Jews in America had a fear that Hitler's Germany could be repeated in the States. When *Goodbye Columbus* and *Five Short Stories* was published in 1959, American Jewry was leaning towards the view that Jews could be liberal, open to opportunity, loving and lovable and mentally strong enough to resist the lure of American materialism that would result in the loss of Jewish identity. The crisis resulting from excessive penchant for assimilation and acculturation was articulated as to seem a threat to Jewish values. These values are the only means to strengthen what the Jewish community really considers most important: Jewish identity and communal survival. Like suffering, assimilation too has altered the nature of Jewish sensibility in America. This change can be felt in Roth's fictional contributions, especially the earliest ones. Following the reaction to *Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth's attention to the problem of Jewish conflict in America became intensified by his needs to come to terms with his own unforeseen rejection. As a way out he created a gallery of testifiers, including writers and himself who embarked on a self-rescue mission justifying his view-points and what he had written.

Those who escaped the holocaust had to bear the guilt of having escaped it. These are all contributory factors that have shaped and continue shaping Jewish sensibility in America. Philip Roth has struggled to establish his identity as a Jewish writer. Perhaps no other modern American writer has done as much to challenge old stereotypes and concepts of masculinity as Roth. Roth has written almost compulsively about achieving independence, authority and maturity as an artist and man in America. Roth's heroes are multiple guises of a single mythic consciousness of the modern urban Jew. This fact both complicates and enriches his fiction



and vision of American culture. Philip Roth's heroes find themselves ensconced in a mental ghetto. This theme of finding one's self unable to escape the past or overcome a perennial perspective from a psychic ghetto pervades most of Roth's fiction. Along with Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, Philip Roth has written intensively about the responsibilities of the writer to explore the American idea and explain contemporary American culture, Roth believes that Jewish writers in America should develop new literary styles and tastes as both a response to their situation as Jews in America and as a way of fulfilling their artistic and literary promise. The Jewish writer and thinker is a linguistic innovator who develops the rhetorical and narrative structures of the myth and ideology of America while maintaining the role of the modern American hero of thought. American reality, according to Philip Roth, may be intractable but Jewish - American writers cannot avoid the challenge, Roth's dismay at trying to reflect American reality eventually develops into an affirmation of the writer's role. Philip Roth is in direct connection with the American literary tradition.

Roth is trying to bridge the chasm between serious writers and spontaneous, vernacular writers, Jewish writers are more spontaneous and vernacular. The contrast between genteel sensibilities and the spontaneous reality of Jewish ethnicity as well as class origins creates acute tension for the Jewish writer and intellectual. Philip Roth acknowledges himself as Jewish writer in terms of experience and thought. He considered it a good fortune to be born a Jew. He considered Jewishness as a complicated, interesting, morally demanding and a very unique, singular experience which he liked. He found himself in the historic predicament of being Jewish with all its complications. Roth has always believed that his own experience as a Jew largely dictates his perception and understanding of the moral and psychological themes that dominate his work. From the psychological point of view Roth's remark - amply described in *Goodbye Columbus* - seem more akin to the earlier ghetto of the Lower East Side. Trying to fictionalize his adolescent experiences, Roth has acknowledged that his early fiction drew upon the ethos of his highly self-conscious Jewish neighborhood, the inhabitants of which were proud, ambitious and equally exhilarated by the experience of getting fused in a melting pot. It was to his Jewish roots and background that Roth instinctively turned for material at the beginning of his writing career. Later in 1969, Roth distilled from that background - the Jewish background - the fictional, folkloric family that he christened Portnoys. Critics may accuse Roth for using Jewish materials, but according to



Think India (Quarterly Journal)
ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05
ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR



ON
DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE
held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English
S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India

him, these critics are victims in a country where they need not be victims provided, they have the will power. Some other critics, according to Roth, prefer to indulge in self-pity - the eternal sufferers - as opposed to more serious and honest expressions of Jewish-American life. Roth's insights into the styles associated with different cultural perspectives of literary modernism, Americanism and Judaism have contributed to his special status as a writer. The different styles reflect different modes of thought and ways of life. Naturally, they operate as checks and critical perspectives on one another - Jew versus American and middle-class conformist versus modernist rebel. Brought together by Roth into one consistent style, they become the ironic consciousness and multi-perspective of the modern urban Jew. Zuckerman, the protagonist of *Zuckerman Unbound* is the autobiographical alter ego of Philip Roth.

Work Cited

Roth, Philip, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. New York: Nentam Books, Inc., 1970.