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GLIMPSES OF THE JEWISH AMERICAN PREDICAMENT IN PHILIP ROTH'S
GOODBYE COLUMBUS

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ABSTRACT

One of the most prominently controversial writers in contemporary literature in general and Jewish American literature in particular, Philip Milton Roth, Popularly known as Philip Roth, has produced an extensive and distinct literary corpus consisting of over thirty published books. Spanning over five decades of writing gaining arguably a misrepresented and misinterpreted notoriety, Roth for the most part depends upon his 'Jewish American upbringing' and life as a writer, to delve deep into concerns and issues such as the quest for identity, conflict between traditional and contemporary moral values and the socio-moral predicaments in the wake of an assimilation overdrive. Ever since the publication of his first book, *Goodbye Columbus*, a collection of stories in 1959, to his official announcement of his retirement Roth has made relentless ripples in the great ocean of American literature. He has consistently produced works that addresses Jewish American dilemmas, portraying Jewish American characters in their struggle to reconcile the pressing desire to be fully 'American' with a deeply ingrained sense of 'self identity'. The scatological content in some of his early works and his harsh and satiric portraits of Jewish life in a style that is compelling and controversial, allegedly pornographic and funny, has brought in not only a large scale critical attention, but also cemented his place in the vast arena of American fiction. Roth's critical and satiric eyes have turned inward and outward in the course of time. Inward, at his own identity as a Jewish writer, and outward, towards the flaws and foibles of Jewish American families and communities; focusing on the Jewish American culture and tradition. this article is an attempt to give a glimpse to the Rothian socio-moral concern in the light of "Goodbye Columbus."

Key Words: Philip Roth, Jewish-American predicament, assimilation, social mobility and materialism.

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One of the most prominently controversial writers in contemporary literature in general and Jewish American literature in particular, Philip Milton Roth, Popularly known as Philip Roth, has produced an extensive and distinct literary corpus consisting of over thirty published books. Spanning over five decades of writing gaining arguably a misrepresented and misinterpreted notoriety, Roth for the most part depends upon his 'Jewish American upbringing' and life as a writer, to delve deep into concerns and issues such as the quest for identity, conflict between traditional and contemporary moral values, thinning distinction between fact and fiction etc.. The vast and extensive literary canvas of Roth can be grouped into various categories as Jewish American writing, consisting of reflections on growing up Jewish in America and on American identity at the end of the 20th century; post-war fiction, black humour and satire; autobiographical and meta-fictional engagements with the art of fiction; on gender and sex in the feminist and post-feminist eras; and on aging and the end of life.

Ever since the publication of his first book, *Goodbye Columbus*, a collection of stories in 1959, to his official announcement of his retirement in the following words, "to tell you the truth, I'm done", to *Les Inrocks*, a leading French magazine, Roth has made relentless ripples in the great ocean of American literature. In an interview given to the Magazine and later reported by the Telegraph, he expressed this in unequivocal terms, when he said, "I do not want to write anymore. I have dedicated my life to the novel-I studied, I taught, I wrote and I read, to the exclusion of almost everything else" ([www.Telegraph.Co.Uk/Philip Roth announces his retirement.html](http://www.Telegraph.Co.Uk/Philip_Roth_announces_his_retirement.html), wed.oct.2013).

Throughout his vast and eventful literary career, Roth has consistently produced works that addresses Jewish American dilemmas, portraying Jewish American characters in their struggle to reconcile the pressing desire to be fully 'American' with a deeply ingrained sense of 'self identity'. The scatological content in some of his early works and his harsh and satiric portraits of Jewish life in a style that is compelling and controversial, allegedly pornographic and funny, has brought in not only a large scale critical attention, but also cemented his status as the leading Jewish American writer after Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud.

Roth's critical and satiric eyes have turned inward and outward in the course of time. Inward, at his own identity as a Jewish writer, and outward, towards the flaws and foibles of Jewish American families and communities; focusing on the Jewish American culture and tradition. Of his Thirty One published works, *Nemesis* (2010) being the last, most critical attention has been concentrated on a handful of them such as *Goodbye Columbus*(1959), *Portnoy's Complaint*(1969), *The Great American Novel*(1973), the American trilogy comprising of the *American Pastoral*(1997), *I Married a Communist*(1998),and *The Human Stain* (2000).

The New York Times Book Review, conducted a survey in 2006, among the prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary figures, to identify the single best work of American fiction published in the last twenty five years. The list included the stalwarts of American fiction-Tony Morrison, Don De Lillo, John Updike, Cormack Mc Carthy etc., the most notable names of the late twentieth century American fiction. Though the list was as expected topped by the acclaimed Tony Morrison for his *Beloved*, Roth's *American Pastoral* emerged as the second runner up, toppling all the hitherto predictions. A.O Scott, pinpointing the steady, varied and excellent literary productions over the past fifteen years, asserts that "if we had asked for the single best writer of fiction" instead of single best work, "he would have won."(Scott, In Search of the Best) This brings out the enviable place of eminence Roth gained among the American literary community.

Born in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey on March 19, 1933, Philip Roth, a prolific and celebrated writer of novels and short stories, known for more his sexual frankness and explicitness, learned early in his life, what it was like to grow up in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood of a large metropolitan area. Considered and acclaimed today by the vast majority of the literary intelligentsia as the giant of Jewish American literature, Roth was born as the first generation son of American Jewish parents, Herman Roth and Beth Finkel Roth.

He had his graduation from Bucknell University. After his Masters Degree in English from the University of Chicago, he joined the United State's army but was discharged from there due to a back injury he sustained during the initial training period. Though he had enrolled himself for the doctoral studies in English at the university of Chicago, he withdrew himself in his greater desire to pursue his career as a writer, which

had its genesis in 1951 when his first story 'philosophy' was published in the college literary magazine *Et Cetera*, for which he himself was a founder editor. With the financial assistance from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and Guggenheim Fellowship, Roth was able to complete his first book, *Goodbye Columbus* and five short stories in the year 1959, which brought him instant critical attention from the contemporary literary world.

Though he continued to teach in various universities, he resigned from teaching to devote himself to be a full-time writer. This was mainly because of the financial success of his third novel, *Portnoy's Complaint* published in the year 1969. With his thought provoking and well-regarded novels, Roth established himself as one of America's best known social realist and social satirist of all times. After having completed almost five decades of literary career, Roth has under his belt all most all the possible literary awards of his time. Winner of two PEN/Faulkner Awards for fiction, a Pulitzer Prize, National Book Critics Awards, Roth's life as a writer was crowned by winning the Man Booker International Award for the year 2011.

Publication of *Goodbye Columbus* saw the emergence of Roth as a leading Jewish American writer. It won him the National Book Award in the year 1960. It was a subtle satire on the American materialistic values as reflected in the conflicting emotions of Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin, wherein, the former, representing the lower-middle-class, struggles to tinker with the unknown life styles of his wealthy Jewish suburbanite lover, Brenda Patimkin.

Throughout his literary oeuvre one can find a few major themes and concerns running through. It would not be wrong to say that one of the most prominent themes that he discusses throughout is the Jewish American Predicament. Many of his subsequent works after *Goodbye Columbus* have focussed on Jewish American characters in their struggles to reconcile their desire to be fully 'American' while being true to their 'Jewish' identity. *Portnoy's Complaint*(1969), *The Counter life* (1986), *Operation Shylock :A Confession* (1993), to name a few of his works in which Jewish characters are seen in a predicament as to how to wriggle out of the new found desire for freedom and commitment to their Jewish morality; leading to a Jewish American predicament.

Another peculiar characteristic feature of Roth is his concern for the thinning boundary between fact and fiction, factuality and fictionality or between writer and subject. Roth often is accused of what is known as 'autobiographical borrowing,' if I may be permitted to use a term to refer to his seemingly persistent use of autobiographical materials in his fiction. This tendency of Roth has made most of his readers and many critics to see his real life reflected in his works of fiction. Clarifying this once in an interview to *The Nation*, he said, "those who see only my life in my works are simply numb to fiction-numb to impersonation, to ventriloquism, to irony, numb to the thousand observations of human life on which a book is built." ("Philip Milton Roth." *The Biography Channel website*). His early novels that portrayed smothering Jewish mothers, harried Jewish fathers, and illicit love affairs involving Jewish characters made him notorious among the contemporary conservative Jewish establishment. But his fictional mastery in reducing the margin between fact and fiction came to the forefront when it drew a sharp critical reaction from his ex-wife Claire Bloom. This fascination for depicting the diminishing margin between fact and fiction led him to the creation of his fictional 'Alter Ego' in the person of Nathan Zuckerman.

The third major characteristic concern of Roth is his persisting humour. His capacity to capture and present the subtle nuances of human life and the spoken word in a variety of accent, intonations and cadences makes him a master comedian, a comedian par excellence! But his mastery over the vocabulary and mellifluous literary embellishments sometimes makes the uninformed reader to miss the underlying socio-political satire and critique. His satires though written mostly from a 'Jewish perspective,' it has a 'universal insight' into the foibles of highly praised American life (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol.201,219).

Jewish history is a combination of anxiety, exile and exodus. It would be not wrong to assess the Jewish history as an interplay of 'promise' and disillusionment, 'appointment' and disappointment. It was a life of existential accommodation and fearful negotiations, a life constantly under anxiety over one's 'Jewishness.' To be Jewish under Roman domination was never comfortable, nor was it any better in the Nazi Europe characterised by pogroms and gas chambers. The generally held historical view is that Jews in America

had it comparatively easy. But having a good mixture of orthodox, reform, conservative, re-constructionist followers of Judaism in America, the Jewish American experience was something unique. The *Ashkenazi*, *Shephardic* and *Mizrahi* life styles and value systems coming in direct, conflicting contact with materialistic and liberal American society brought in a predicament that was hitherto unknown. What added uniqueness to the American predicament was the fact the conflict was not only inter-religious and inter-ethnic, but it was more of an intra-religious and intra-ethnic clash of views and values.

A constant tension between alienation and assimilation was one of the distinguishing features of the Jewish experience. The persistent desire to maintain a distance so as to preserve the traditionally maintained 'chosen race' identity was always in clash with the desire to assimilate and adapt. This was an attempt to downplay the actual delineation that emerged from the desire to preserve the self identity. Though this tension was always present throughout Jewish diasporic existence, the 'American experience' was a unique one. The uniqueness of the American experience germinates from the difference in the motif of assimilation. The primary motif of assimilation in the Roman Judea, Tzarist Russia, or the much feared Nazi Germany was the fear of religious persecution, and a probable racial extermination. But in the Americas the motivating factor of assimilation was the promise of the 'Great American Dream.'

The tension between alienation and assimilation for a 'second generation' American Jew was something unique. If the first generation American Jews had to confront a tension between Judaism and Christianity, and its allied alienations and discriminations typified in the classified ads which read, "Christians only need apply," or the departmental stores that had postures displaying, "No dogs or Jews allowed". But the second generation Jews in America was living in a context where the Judaeo-Christian 'inter-religious' conflict was replaced by an 'intra-religious' or better still by an 'intra-Jewish' conflict. It was between the believing Jews and the secularized Jews, between the young assimilated Jew and their parochial and orthodox parents. Such was the post world war II scenario in America.

Now the question that comes upfront is how this tension between assimilation and alienation becomes an existential predicament in America. The inter-religious and inter-racial differences that existed in America was shared and spread out over a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups and therefore unlike in Europe the Jews were not singled out for delineation. The tension arose when in an attempt to attain the promised American dream- dream of prosperity, freedom and equality of opportunity, the Horatio Alger myth of '*rags-to-riches*,' many immigrant Jews found that a secular American identity was desirable, sometimes even or more desirable than their Jewish identity itself. The major chunk of the Jewish American predicament comes from the dilemma, whether or not one's sense of identity would allow the co-existence of 'Jewish' and 'American' identities without the adoption and assimilation of one, resulting in the alienation of the other? The predicament and tension comes because, given the then historical context, both were desirable! The uniqueness in the American experience lies in the fact that there was a potential loss of some desired aspect of one's sense of identity, in the process of attaining the American dream, that was equally 'desired' as it was the major *raison d'être* of their migration.

The encyclopedia of Jewish American literature while making a survey of Jewish American literature from 1900 to the contemporary world, is of the opinion that the "first Jewish American writer of real stature was Abraham Cahan, whose classic *The Rise Of David Levinsky* (1917) underscored the impossible tension generated by a population caught between Jewish tradition and American modernity" (Cronin, Gloria L. and Alan L. Berger. *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Literature*, xvii). The novel being a Jewish version of America's favourite Horatio Alger rags-to-riches narrative, David the protagonist who arrives at the new found land with four cent is a millionaire by the end of the novel. But he is very nostalgic when he says, "I cannot escape from myself; my past and present does not comport well" (Cronin and Alan,xvii). Cahan's seminal work became a paradigm for future assimilationist novels whose protagonist's old world religious identity remains forever in conflict with the secular America. But the proletariat writers of the 1920s lamented the younger generation's rapid and unthought-of assimilation into American culture, their abandonment and disregard for the Jewish orthodoxy which they had kept very close to their heart even at the European Diaspora.

The period between 1940-1950s saw the emergence of Jewish American writers who came of age after decades of American anti-Semitism, World War II and the 'Shoah', wrote with extra-ordinary passion about the issues of Judaism in the American context. These writers explored the new Israelite exiles in the American Babylonia, reminiscing the ancient question, "how shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Saul Bellow was the major exponent of this period.

The period between 1950-1970 was one of the major phases in the history of Jewish American literature. During 1950s, considered as the 'Jewish decade' (Cronin and Alan, xx) of American literature, writers such as Herman Wouk, Chaim Potok, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth delved deep into the themes of Jewish American alienation in the aftermath of modernity, world war II and the holocaust. In the couple of decades that followed, they juxtaposed the Jewish life before and after the *Shoah*. Philip Roth is one of the most influential figures of contemporary Jewish American literature, who, over five decades has grappled with the theme of Jewish American assimilation and its allied predicaments in an uncompromising manner.

Steven Milowitz, writing a preface to *Philip Roth Considered: the Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer*, introduces Philip Roth as a "victim of gross misreadings." (Milowitz, ix) He is of the opinion that ever since the publication of his book, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories*; Roth has been misread in regard to autobiography, misogyny and anti-Semitism. Added to that there has been an inability or unwillingness to accept acknowledge his essential concerns, the exploration of the moral complexities of the postmodern experience, by making use of the Rothian hallmark; the interpenetration of reality and fantasy. The gross misreading that has been a consistent feature of the literary criticism levelled against Roth, has taken the Rothian focus away, from his attempt to grapple with issues particular to the Jewish experience in America, the "internal wrestling with the felt allegiance to the Jewish past and to American modernity," (Milowitz, x). Roth has given us a gallery of Semitic stereotypes in the characters of Sophie, Alexander Portnoy, Brenda Patimkin, Eli the fanatic, Nathan Zuckerman etc., to cite a few that has become house-hold names in Jewish American fiction.

Goodbye Columbus received a mixed response from the readers and critics. While some praised it as bristling with literary self-confidence, others accused Roth of exploiting Jewish –American culture in order to gain acceptance as an American author. There are different and contradictory views regarding the nature of this book. Jeremy learner, for example, in his essay, "conversion of the Jews," calls *Goodbye Columbus* as an 'indictment of the Jewish upper-middle class,' (Jeremy Learner, 28). Debra Shostak, professor of English at the college of Wooster, Ohio and a Roth scholar, opines in "impersonation and the diaspora Jews," that the underlying force behind Roth in *Goodbye Columbus* has to do with the process of Jewish assimilation after the second world war (Debra Shostak, 117).

Apart from the external predicament that Roth is speaking about in this book, an internal predicament that awaits the reader is that the five stories that Roth has put together, has an individual focus or it has different focal points. Therefore a assigning a general or 'blanket theme' would be a tad far-fetched. Therefore, in my opinion, what one can do is to analyse each single story to find out its 'single purpose' of the 'microscopic' exposition of Jewish assimilation, hypocrisy, abandoning of Jewish morality in pursuance of individualism and material prosperity.

Many of the stories represent Roth's effort to deal with the tensions and predicaments that the second generation Jews faced in the post world war II scenario. The criticism and the negative response it received among the intelligentsia and the Jewish rabbinic leadership is because of its unflattering mirroring of truth through fiction, that which is open to gentile reading. The issue is problematized in Samuel Osherson's *Rekindling The Flame: The Many Paths To A Vibrant Judaism*, where he endorses such stories for an intra-Jewish readership, while criticising Roth for 'showing our dirty laundry to the *goyim*' (Osherson, 32).

Goodbye Columbus was a fictional representation of the existing post world war II scenario, wherein the lives of individual Jews exhibited glimpses of materialism, class consciousness, hypocrisy, favouritism, and a blind assimilationism in favour a social upward mobility etc, which in his opinion left unchecked and counter-witnessed might lead to serious repercussions in future similar to that of German Nazi holocaust. These, in the

eyes of Roth, are predicaments, which Jewish society in America as a whole has to extricate themselves from, sooner the better.

Goodbye Columbus is an example of Rothian view that blatant materialism of the newly rich Jewish community is vulgar and destructive of human values. Here in the first story, Roth tries to explicate and lampoon this materialism. He pits the Jewish working class life of "Newark," personified in Neil Klugman, against the Nouveau riche life of suburban "Short Hills," New Jersey. Three major issues that are being pinpointed here in this novella, having the same name as the title of the book, is Jewish materialism, class consciousness and the newly found sexual freedom in the new found land. Neil Klugman, the male protagonist, and his confrontation with Jewish American identity is represented by his love affair with Brenda Patimkin, his female counterpart. In the backdrop of a story of longing and young love, Roth in his own characteristic style, proposes a critique of Jewish materialism, assimilation, sexual freedom that contrasts one generation with the other, each in their own way right in what they consider to be right.

The Klugmans and the Patimkins are representatives of the two generations markedly different in their social, and religious attitudes, outlook, and lifestyles. Patimkins symbolic of the posh, suburban, materialistic post-world war II prosperity, who struggles to distance themselves from their past, in an attempt to establish membership in the national, largely gentile elite. This is evident in Brenda's scornful remark about Mrs. Patimkin wherein she says, "she still thinks we live in Newark" (*Goodbye Columbus*, 27). Their materialistic affluence and perfect assimilation becomes evident when young Patimkins undergoes cosmetic surgery to beautify her physical appearance. Alan France in his critical essay, "Philip Roth's goodbye Columbus and the limits of commodity culture" calls it as a conscious attempt to create a physical distance from their ethnicity and lower middle class roots in Newark (Alan, 84). there are also metaphoric indicators in the story to suggest the same, such as the Sports Tree at the Patimkins that epitomises the nouveau riche's focus on out-door, athletic life, that is in sharp contrast to the bookish Neil Klugmans whose home is the reference desk of the Newark public library (Nadel, Ira B. *Philip Roth: a Literary Reference to his Life and Work*, 102).

The second aspect that Roth focuses in the story is the conflict between traditional morality and the sexual freedom associated with the 'American dream'. Brenda signifies the American dream and suburban prosperity. Brenda and Neil indulges in pre-marital sex, which is considered by her conservative father as some of the 'shocks' in life (*Goodbye Columbus*,98), while her mother in a letter addressed to her says that their behaviour is something that she 'never in her life be able to understand' (*Ibid*, 99). The confrontation between the orthodox morality and the assimilationistic liberal freedom is something that Mrs. Patimkins would 'carry with her to the grave' (*Ibid*, 99). The conflict that is going on in the mind of the characters is made visible in presenting the marriage of Ron and Harriet, in perfect consonance to the Jewish traditional morality. If their traditional wedding becomes a symbol of Jewish morality even in the midst of material affluence, Brenda's diaphragm becomes a counter witness, but the disapproval from Brenda's materialistic and class conscious parents brings home the dynamics of the inner predicament that goes on in the lives of the nouveau riche American Jews. A predicament that results from the craving for social mobility, class up gradation, and a socio-ethnic assimilation and identification, that is in constant tension with the desire to maintain the traditional Jewish morality that does not jell well with the accompanying licentiousness and sexual freedom, is what Roth considers to be the great American predicament. The predicament is very clear in Brenda and Neil. Brenda's decision to return to her parents and Neil's final rejection of Brenda portrays a set of 'divided selves.' Being victims of an unresolved predicament, an inner conflict between traditionalism and assimilationism, both having elements which are equally 'desirable' and 'undesirable.'

The story is an example of dilly dallying. To quote the words of Alan France, it is a story of how 'class interests taking primacy over romantic inclinations.' (France, 88). It is a story of finding oneself *reflected back to oneself*, from the outside of the outside bastion of highbrow, gentile America, to which Neil aspired (Shostak, 119). It is the story of realization of the Jew's excluded position in spite of his material attainments and affluence. Standing in front of the Lamont Library, he feels himself as 'a substance' (*Goodbye Columbus*, 103) but as he boards the train back to Newark, he retains his identity as a Jewish outsider, while the predicament goes on...unresolved.

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