



UNRAVELLING THE THREADS OF FAMILY: THE DEBACLE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN PHILIP ROTH'S *AMERICAN PASTORAL*

Prakash A^{1*} A Chrispin Antonieta Dhivya² Oli Lamessa³ & D.J.B.Esther Rajathi⁴

¹Professor, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

³Lecturer, Department of English, Kotebe University of Education, SSC, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

⁴Assistant Professor, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

Philip Roth is one of the greatest writers in America. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *American Pastoral* in 1997. His works portray the Jewish bourgeois life and also the painful complications in family relationships. Some of his works deal satirically with political and sexual themes. His authorship is intertwined with the theme of an idealistic, family-loving secular Jewish American who tries to assimilate into the mainstream of society and build a good family and a business enterprise. Most of his second and third-generation characters detest the smothering influence of fogeys, rabbis, and community leaders. This article is an attempt to find out the debacle of love and relationships in *American Pastoral*.

Keywords: bourgeois life, Jewish-American, idealistic, Pastoral, and fogeys.

Introduction

Philip Roth's novels depict the debacle of love, relationships, religion, and human values. *American Pastoral* is one such novel that features debacle of every kind. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Roth has presented the sweetest and the most handsome hero he has ever produced. In all the latest

novels, Roth, who is also aging and prolific as ever, produces heroes who become old and withered in body and mind, and they are further reduced to the very edge of non-existence. They are seen mourning and waiting for death to be swept from the earth. The latest heroes in his novels mourn for the loss of health, impotence, failing memory and

physical sickness, and loss of relations. At the end of all the latest novels, the heroes have understood every man's tragedy. In *American Pastoral*, everyone is a failure. Dale Peck in his *Dangerous Girls* says,

In the past Roth allowed Zuckerman to lag behind him always: now he's pushed him on ahead. The new Zuckerman is elderly, impotent, and incontinent. He may have escaped the prostate cancer that claimed the lives of many of his contemporaries, but it is obvious that this is only a reprieve, and it is likely that the next time we see Zuckerman, he will be buried. The fear of death, or if not fear, then at least the confronting with life's conclusion, lends Zuckerman's narrative a tone that is reflective, sentimental, and even just plain maudlin. If not fear, then at least the confrontation of life's end. (22-23)

American Pastoral, published in 1997, describes the debacle of the protagonist Seymour "Swede" Levov, who is a Jewish American business tycoon and former high school star athlete from Newark, New Jersey. The novel describes an economic, social, and political debacle that America faced in the 1960s. It shows how the turmoil in the country has affected the happy and conventional life of the rich Jewish Hero Levov. The misery and the debacle are understood when one reads. It was as if having an innate connection to life

was something that only a few lucky youths were born with and that, in general, humans lacked. Huh, that's peculiar. (*American Pastoral* 329)

Discussion

This, Philip Roth's twenty-second novel, is titled *American Pastoral*. Using Nathan Zuckerman as a mouthpiece, Philip Roth traces the development of the United States from the late 1940s (what Zuckerman calls the golden period) through the tumultuous years of the 1960s and early 1970s. The protagonist of this book would do anything to live a quiet life in rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, away from the hustle and bustle of city life as a dedicated husband, father, son, and businessman. Swede's parents are fairly traditional second-generation Jewish Americans. His grandparents founded a major glove company, which he now owns. The protagonist has been a popular, charismatic, and fortunate figure in his community since his early years.

Swede is prudent, genteel, traditional, and understanding all his life except in two situations. First, he married Dawn Dwyer, a charming Irish former Miss New Jersey. Secondly, against his father's wish, Swede bought a grand stone house in Old Rimrock, thinking that it would be good for his child to grow up in an assimilated culture. By buying



that, he fulfilled his wife's wish. He does everything to live in an area where Jews do not live. Also, the newly bought house is big enough for his wife to raise cows. She spends millions of dollars to buy cows, and Swede has to pay a heavy price to fulfill the desires of his unsatisfied wife and neurotic daughter.

The story of Swede is narrated by Roth's alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman, who happened to meet Swede in a restaurant in New York. Zuckerman was so happy to see his school day hero and his best buddy's brother. Zuckerman even introduced Swede to his friends as the greatest athlete Weequahic High School has ever seen.

After ten years had passed, Zuckerman was surprised to receive a letter from Swede stating that he would want to have dinner with Zuckerman in New York. Swede desired to chat about his father, who had recently passed away at the age of ninety-six due to the effects of bereavement. The terrible calamity that befell the family ultimately resulted in the passing of Swede's father. It was easy to get Zuckerman's agreement to meet at an Italian restaurant. During their discussion, Swede focused almost exclusively on his three sons and seldom mentioned his father.

Zuckerman was frustrated at the fact that he couldn't get into Swede's mind to

know what happened. He was also surprised at the serenity of Swede.

According to Jerry, Meredith, known as Merry, destroyed the happiness of her family and the life of her father. Merry planted a bomb in the post office at Old Rimrock when she was merely 16 years old. The bomb killed a passerby who happened to be a doctor. She did this horrible act in protest against America's involvement in Vietnam's war. She was also called the Rimrock bomber. After that, Merry was known as the Rimrock Bomber. Swede brought her up in a traditional way and she paid attention and opposed vehemently. The bomb she planted became a debacle for 'the Swede' and all his dreams. The debacle of Swede is revealed through Jerry. In a conversation with his brother, he says:

Do you think you know what a daughter is? You have no idea what a daughter is. Do you think you know what this country is? You have no idea what this country is. You have a false image of everything. All you know is what a fucking glove is. This nation gives off a creepy vibe. She was violated in some way. What kind of people do you believe she was hanging out with and why? It was inevitable that she would be

raped once she was out there. This is not Old Rimrock, old friend; she is over there, in the United States, where she has been all along. She has entered that world, that wacky world out there, and with all that is happening out there, what do you expect? A teenager from Rimrock, New Jersey; of course, she was going to act inappropriately when she got there; of course, everything went to hell. (AMP 276)

When everyone was talking about their old days in that high school reunion, Zuckerman was deeply involved in the thoughts of Swede. He thought that 'the Swede' wanted to talk to him about his daughter but instead talked about his father when they met in the restaurant for dinner. Zuckerman also thought that it was the greatest wound in Swede's life that he could not brush aside even though he had reconstructed his life by marrying another lady and fathering three sons on her (432)

Zuckerman's friend Joy Halpern narrated the unknown details of Merry. Even after that Zuckerman could not conclude Merry's character change from an innocent child to a horrible bomber that shocked the entire America and how the pastoral of Swede breaks down. Zuckerman then reimagines

Merry's early life. In his imaginative tale, Merry starts taking junk food and becomes overweight in response to all her father's futile attempts to cure her stuttering. She started thinking about politics, became a vehement critic of the Vietnam War, and renounced her family's middle-class values. She starts fighting with her parents for everything. Swede could not control her from taking afternoon trips to New York even when sometimes she stays overnight. When Swede asks her strictly not to leave the house on Saturdays and that she can raise her voice against the Vietnam war only at a permissible level, she stops going out on Saturdays but one day blows up the local post office.

After Merry bombed the local post office, she went into hiding. The whole family was shocked beyond limits. All Swede's efforts in bringing up his stuttering child became awry. The more he loved his daughter, the more she hated him. His wife added more misery to his life. The more money he gave her, the more she spent and the more unsatisfied she was about her life. Everything was a debacle for Swede. Swede, who is always a calm and unbroken personality, is seen sobbing in his car outside a restaurant. He was broken when he came to know that his daughter was raped many times. He was utterly broken when he came to know that his



daughter was dead. Jerry, who always hated his niece Meredith, says,

You were looking for Miss America? You've got her, and she's going to get even with you because she's your daughter! You wanted to be a genuine American jock, a genuine American soldier, a genuine American hotshot with a gorgeous Gentile babe on your arm, didn't you? You yearned to be a citizen of the United States of America, just like everyone else, right? You certainly do, big boy, all thanks to your daughter's efforts. The truth about this location is smack dab in your face at this very now. Because of the assistance of your daughter, you have reached the deepest possible level of American crazy stuff a guy is capable of achieving. America went berserk! America running amok! Goddamn it, Seymour, and goddamn you, if you were a father who loved his daughter, you would not do this to her. (AMP 277)

Swede's non-Jewish wife and assimilation have brought chaos into his life. The more assimilated he is, the more troubled he is now. What he did against his parents and religion, has become a trap of death for him. The great hero, who did nothing but be

generous to everyone, was tormented to a spiritual death before he faced a mortal death. Tim Adams says, "After the bomb, which kills a family friend, all hell breaks loose for the Swede. His daughter disappears and, in his mind, becomes responsible for all of the Weathermen-inspired mayhem of the late Sixties" (AMP 432).

Jerry narrated the story of Swede to Nathan Zuckerman. Zuckerman was wondering why such a good person like Swede should become an object of hatred for his only daughter Merry and he framed an imaginary tale that deals with the psychological problem of Merry. Through Merry's story written by Nathan Zuckerman, one finds that she starts stuttering because she is jealous of her beautiful mother. In one situation, when Merry was eleven years old, she asked her father to kiss in her mouth as he kissed her mother intrigued by this Swede hesitated for a moment and after he was forced, he kissed her passionately in her mouth. Zuckerman says this only kiss he gave his daughter is the root cause of all the debacles we see in this novel. According to Ted Gioia: "He (Zuckerman) comes to learn how the man who apparently "had it all" became a tragic victim of circumstances beyond his control, facing challenges that no

amount of on-court footwork or off-court self-discipline would overcome” (2).

Swede's longing for an idyllic life is broken after his daughter becomes a bomber. He fails to understand the reason for his fall. Through the downfall of this hero, one finds chaos and confusion caused by World War II and its aftermath. This novel presents the debacle through the first-person narration of Nathan Zuckerman and at the end of the novel the author uses the third-person narrative method. The bomb, Merrythought, was the answer for the corruption in America in general and the diplomats and businessmen like her father in particular. In one sense, the story is about the birth of a charming and good child in a good family and her transformation into a horrible murderer. Her existential questions about war with Vietnam, and self-immolations shown on the television shocked her parents. Eventually, she created an interest in watching all those things.

All the efforts of Swede in bringing his daughter as a responsible girl failed. Merry's parents could not even track her whereabouts. When Swede finds his daughter in the end, he is unable to tell his wife because of the horrible condition of his only daughter. This novel talks about the debacle of relationship and understanding between grandparents, parents, and children. It starts with the subtitle

Paradise Remembered and ends with the fall. Even the titles depict the omni presence of debacle in the novel. The hero marries and goes away from his parents and race in search of a pastoral life and instead faces problems while dealing with his wife, daughter, and business.

American Pastoral is named “The Fall”. This tells the readers that the novel deals with nothing but the debacle of America in general and the debacle of the Swedes in particular. This chapter deals with how desperately Swede searches for his daughter who went hiding to escape arrest. Buildings after buildings were blown. The economic conditions also worsened. There was much difficulty in running the glove industry in black-dominated areas. Despite generosity towards black workers, Swede's father Lou Levov advised his son to change the location of the industry. Swede did not listen to his father as he thought his daughter would suspect him of being an opportunist. He has some loyal workers who stay with him in times of trouble.

At this time he happens to meet his daughter who tells him everything that happened after she went underground. She said that she had to move from place to place, changed names, planted bombs in two more places, and was robbed and raped. Swede was



broken beyond limits when he came to know that his daughter was raped. He begged her to come home with him and Merry refused this offer. Swede asked for his brother Jerry's help in bringing Merry back home. Now, Jerry criticized Swede for all his weaknesses in imposing his will or leaving the matter as it was. In a conversation, Jerry tells his brother, "Goddamn it, Seymour, goddamn you, if you were a father who loved his daughter," thunders Jerry into the phone". "If you were a father who loved your daughter," Jerry shouts at the Swede, "you would never have left her in that room! You would have never let her out of your sight!" (AMP 277)

Though Roth differs from other writers, he is still a Jewish American writer characterized by the concept of Jewish Americanness. Generally, Jewish-American writer often reflect their views toward Jewish culture, ritual, and religion, ritual and they always maintain their Jewish and American heritages.

Conclusion

Philip Roth's fiction has gone into various changing phases. It has been influenced by the concept of immigration, the great depression, the American Dream, anti-Semitism, and the post-memory syndrome. His fiction is about the failure of the American Dream in which one finds abandonment,

divorce, poverty, family dislocation, and terrible homesickness, which causes a conflict in Philip Roth's characters – to be centric or concentric. The characters oscillate between the American centrist and the Jewish centrist domains. However, the materialistic inclination has drawn many a character into the white centrist system. At the same time, the traditional pull causes disillusionment in many a Jew which naturally reinforces a condition of despair and a question of identity. Consequently, in the quest for identity, the characters are involved in social, religious, and cultural politics for the sake of survival; therefore, the common themes of resistance, protest, Jewish socialism, Jewish family disruptions, Jewish labor unrest, Jewish religious orthodoxy, and Jewish assimilation are always noticeable.

The protagonist of Philip Roth comes as represents three generations of American Jews starting from the great depression to the present. As an influential author, Philip Roth has structured his text with an architectural precision in that, his texts are projective of a multi-layered aesthetics which would put him on par with great American writers. More importantly, Philip Roth's demonstration of American Jewish life is punctuated by American centrist pressures. Also, there is then the authorial response to the holocaust or

it is well echoed in his character portrayal. Significantly, Philip Roth escapes stereotypes of characters quite confidently.

Over the years one finds Roth's fiction has come to pass off into various cultural phases. His writing career is inclusive of three cultural trends of America – the national, the multinational, and the transnational. As Philip Roth, as a writer has spread over these three phases of existence. No wonder the characters are put to contest those situations according to the space and time in which they exist. Many of Roth's novels present the debacle of family relationships vividly.

References

- Philip Roth. *American Pastoral*. London: Vintage, 1998. Print.
- Appelfeld, Aharon. "The Artist as a Jewish Writer." *SpringerLink*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 01 Jan. 1988. Web. 14 Nov. 2010.
- Barnes, Julian. "LRB · Julian Barnes · Philip Roth in Israel." *London Review of Books*. London Review of Books, 04 Mar. 1987. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Bellow, Saul, and J. M. Coetzee. *Dangling Man*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Docx, Edward. "Nemesis by Philip Roth | Book Review." *The Observer*.

Guardian News and Media, 02 Oct. 2010. Web.

- Douglass, Frederick, and David W. Blight. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 2003. Print.
- Eaglestone, Robert. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. Oxford: Oxford U, 2009. Print.
- Howe, Irving. *The Critical Point on Literature and Culture*. New York: n.p., 1975. Print.
- . *The Literature of America: Nineteenth Century*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970. Print.
- . *Philip Roth Reconsidered - In Modern Critical Views: Philip Roth*. New York: Harold Bloom, 1986. Print.
- Jefferson, Thomas, and Julian P. Boyd. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1965. Print.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Confronting the Failures Of a Professor Who Passes." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 01 May 2000. Web. 14 Oct. 2010.