



Mélange of Humourism, Judaism and Hebraism in Philip Roth's 'Goodbye, Columbus': An Analytical Study

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Abstract: In the vanguard of rising Jewish ethnicity in America after World War II, Philip Roth penned a novella, 'Goodbye, Columbus'. This incandescently alive novella depicts the embedded flippancy and humour of the lower middle class and upper class. Neil Klugman, a librarian, hailed from Newark. On the other hand, Brenda Patimkin, a college student of an affluent family, lived in Short Hills. Neil, the protagonist and the narrator of the story, falls in love with Brenda. Roth, through the character of Neil, has mildly slated the relationship of Gentiles with other characters. A cursory perusal of the novella also surfaces what elements impelled the writer to show this side of the picture regarding the delineation of Jews' internal matters. In this study, we have argued about the novella in terms of its Hebraism and humouristic features; the study has also underpinned how Judaism is reflected in the novella.

Introduction

Philip Roth, a widely acclaimed American Jewish novelist – a protean and a prolific – in modern English literature has presented diversified themes like social unity, Judaism, humourism and promiscuity in his novels – but there is nothing swashbuckling that the readers can find in his novels. The novella has delineated several characters that are Jews but have deprived Jewish characters. The novella surfaces the vulgarity and flamboyance of the Jewish middle and lower class, along with their obsessiveness with material gains. The novella portrays how the 3rd and 2nd generation of Jews and the Jewish Diaspora who assimilated with American society came out of their parental ghettos and joined universities, colleges and vocations. The writer has lampooned himself as a Jew of Newark (New Jersey) and the society in an outright manner. Philip Roth has probably encapsulated his own experience in the novella.

Mr Roth was from amongst the last triumvirate of white male American writers.

Others included John Updike and Saul Bellow. While John Updike introduced arcane vocabulary and distinct prose style, Bellow introduced the befuddled nature of modern man in his novels. But on the other hand, Roth introduced something new, which we will study in detail. In the 1960s, when several American writers were winding down, at the same time, Roth wrote wonderful historical novels like "The Human Stain", "American Pastoral", and "I married a communist". Philip Roth was often bracketed with Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow, but he did not like the label with which he was usually endowed. "The epithet American-Jewish writer has no meaning for me," he said. "If I'm not an American, I'm nothing."

"Portnoy's Complaint" was the novel which made Roth a celebrity since it was fraught with the lewd treatment of sexuality. This novel made Roth a controversial figure because of the detailed depiction of explicit scenes of masturbation. Portnoy, the protagonist and a bachelor, belonged to a Jewish family. He remained tied to his

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mother's apron strings. Being a bachelor, he was 'lust-ridden' and fulfilled his sexual frustration through different means especially jerking off. The novel 'Portnoy's Complaint' is set in New Jersey, while the novel 'Goodbye, Columbus' is set in New Jersey. But the theme is different in both novels.

"American Pastoral" was a novel written by Philip Roth and was published in 1997. The novel spins a yarn of a son of a Jewish American businessman who lived in Newark, New Jersey, USA. This novel delineates how Jews are spending their life and what hypocrisy they are facing. When Seymour Irving Levov, the protagonist of the novel discovers that his wife is having clandestine love affair with architect William Orcutt. Seymour comes to the conclusion that everyone has taken a veneer of uprightness and respectability, but inwardly they have resorted to subversive behaviour. The novel also underscores the unrest and racial problems encountered by Jews during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Roth's novella, "Goodbye, Columbus", won him a plethora of accolades when he was in his fledgling state being a writer and this novella also brought him National Book Prize. The reviewers have termed the novella and its derivations as humouristic and satirical. Several critics have taken the novella in a multi-thronged manner. Roth himself maintained that the novella depicts the encounter between the slogan of Jewish solidarity and the Jewish middle class' uncertainty about their identity, which they have lost while mobilizing upward. Generally speaking, Roth has been regarded as anti-communist, semi-autobiographical, steeply radical, a humourist, and euphemistic pornographer by critics. Few critics have termed him anti-Semitic, a misogynist, self-centred, egotistical and a liberal defender.

When we label Philip Roth with such diversified adjectives, then we make him a conglomerate novelist. Roth's narrative style is quite different because all his nonfiction novels are fraught with acrimony and incivility. Posnock, while juxtaposing Philip Roth with an American novelist, has underscored something considerable about Roth. As Ernest Hemingway is famous for bullfighting and fishing, William Faulkner is famous for alcohol and wisteria. Philip Roth is known for boorishness and discourtesy. But the usage of rudeness by Roth does not make him a sleazy author, but this characteristic makes his

books witty and lively. Look at the following excerpt from the novel 'Goodbye, Columbus', but that does not make him an outright rude author but may make him an outspoken author:

"I wouldn't have let you, Bren."

"Wouldn't you have?"

"No."

"Make love to me, Neil, Right now."

"Where?"

"Do it! Here on this cruddy cruddy cruddy sofa."

"And I obeyed her."

The writer has fantastically observed the follies and snobbery of the individuals and delineated the characters by pointing out those deficiencies in a detailed manner. Safer has rightly remarked about Roth that he has used black comedy while portraying an imaginary world: Safer says that close perusal of the novella will show that Roth has used acerbic humour to present his contemporary era, himself and the Jewish community. Sometimes it also happens that through pungent humour, he criticizes the shortcomings and foibles of the American Jewish community, especially those living in Short Hills and New Jersey. That can wreak self-decimation if we focus on Philip Roth's personal psychological fixations and foibles. By resorting to the humourous mode of description, Roth has tried to make us realize that we live in a world of outlandish caricature where the ridiculous and cataclysmic go together. It is such a world where dark comedy keeps on emerging, and we as readers are unable to decide whether we have to cry or we have to laugh. (Safer 2006:1)

"Goodbye, Columbus" primarily deals with Neil Klugman, who is a librarian and is venturing to step on the top of the stair by joining Patimkins' family and its clique, a family that belongs to the high echelon of society. Roth's earlier works are marked with civility and morality, and the protagonists faced a situation which was a bit incongruous with the hypocritical people surrounding them, but that is not the case with "Goodbye, Columbus" Rabbi Lewis has rightly said that Roth has portrayed lecherous and depraved characters. "Portnoy's Complaint", another superb novel by Roth, talks about Alexander Portnoy, a Jewish bachelor who describes himself as a "sex maniac". Portnoy tells

his doctor, Spievogel, that he is a veritable "Raskolnikov of jerking off". So Jewish language and Hebraism are also an underneath message of the novel "Portnoy's Complaint".

Roth has portrayed family structure and woman and man relationship, which is witnessing a change from the traditional way. Pinsker has aptly said about Roth that he is "the hare of Aesop's tortoise and hare fable, a young man out of the literary gate before most of his competitors had made it to the track" (2005). The transitioned roles of Jewish society living in the United States caused ripples to the men having Jewish ethnicity, and Roth has presented it in a caustic manner. The novel further talks about "*the effects of contraceptive technology on sexual and romantic relationships and the shifting power dynamics between men and women*" (Capo, 2003). Unenviably, several critics have failed to understand Philip Roth's critical approach in his novels. Sometimes, it transpires that Roth's critical perspectives awaken the critics with a startle, but sometimes it passes without being noticed.

Roth has also discussed adaptation and immigration in the novel. Those who emigrated from Europe to the United States are not real Americans. When the Jews shifted to Short Hill from Newark Shtetl, they made Americans. That is the turning point for them. But as far as Neils' views and aspirations towards Patimkinization and the American dream is concerned, he also talks about another type of shifting as well. Roth has pinpointed this class crevice which lies in the American Jewish society. The Patimkin family is incarnate of upper-class society, while Neil Klugman and his aunt Gladys, an embodiment of the lower class, it is this higher class that Neil is vying for. There is also another young coloured boy who is in his teenager, who frequents the library to get a specific book, and this boy is also Neil's friend.

Discussion

Newark and New Jersey bear considerable significance for Philip Roth because these two cities also symbolize the lower classes and upper classes in the novel. Many critics are at variance with regard to Roth's depiction of New Jersey, some are disgruntled, and some promote the very idea of Roth. For example, Fiedler, a critic, has congratulated Roth for writing "Goodbye

Columbus" at the age of twenty-six and for delineation of a Jewish family; and for the portrayal of Newark and Short Hills. Fiedler further says in the novella that Roth has a good dream, and it does not matter how he is going to realize his dream. Frankly speaking, Horn, another critic, states that Roth grew up in New Jersey and later in Short Hills as described narrated in the novel, and that made Horn's views exacerbated, and he said about the novella. Horn said that he is disgruntled and frustrated with the American literature written against the backdrop of Jewish ethnicity written in the 1960s. He further said that Roth and other authors of that age had spun those yarns that had nothing to do with people who were in their adolescence (qtd. Lewin, 2008).

Roth depicts the characters from the milieu in which he grew up; instead of portraying the characters in the novel in a humorous manner, he portrays them in a satirical manner. Kimmage, a critic, says: The Jews who are living in Short Hills are utilizing their full energy to embark on the American dream. Neil Klugman also traverses towards Short Hills from Newark outskirts to ensconce himself on the couch of the American Dream. (Severs, 2007). To realize and put into practice the American dream is an onerous task, and to lead an affluent and prosperous life would be a far cry. That is what Kimmage emphasizes and surfaces people's tragedy who want to move to the high echelon of society:

The author also has Jewish ethnicity, that's why he was successful in presenting those characters who belong to Jewish backgrounds. Neil Klugman, in the novella, has a young friend who frequents the library, and their destiny falls on the same line. Judaism turns out to be the main form of characterization in "*Goodbye, Columbus*", and the embedded difference and the relationship between the Jewish upper-class and lower-class. The writer has satirized the chic way of living, life and wishes of the two classes. Harap says that the author has portrayed the dilemma and incongruities lying in the society and minds of Jewish people: "Goodbye Columbus" has exhibited novel and outlandish talent by using Jewish material in the arena of the literary world. Jewishness runs throughout the novel like blood in the veins.

In the novella, a young librarian, Neil Klugman, who hails from the lower echelon of

society, is living with his Aunt Gladys. Neil develops an amorous relationship with an upper-class society girl, Brenda Patimkin. Their relationship gets deeper with the passage of time. The character of Aunt Gladys is portrayed in a comic way, but the rest of the characters are presented in a serious manner. Halio avers that Neil's aunt is a stereotypical mother who has traits of a real Jewish woman and has a bit hilarious personality (2014:20). The novel is awash with such examples when Aunt Gladys is patronizing Neil in a humorous manner:

"Hello?" she said.

"Aunt Gladys," I said, "How are you?"

"You're sick."

"No, I'm having a fine time. I wanted to call you, I'm going to stay another week."

"Why?" (Goodbye, Columbus 59)

Whenever Neil Klugman phones her Aunt Gladys she responds or answers him in such a way that she considers him sick because she thinks that she is outright responsible for his health. Her might is also fully engrossed with saving money. Roth has used verbal humour instead of situational humour while presenting the character of Aunt Gladys.

However, the character of Klugman's aunt is a stereotype of Jewish lower strata of society; and she is incarnate of light comedy and humour that dribbles from her outlook. When Neil tells her aunt about his sojourn in Short Hills, then again, we find an outlook of the lower class towards the upper class and the Jewish perspective presented in "Goodbye, Columbus".

"You'll leave their telephone number God forbid you should get sick."

"Okay"

"Milburn they live?"

"Short Hills. I'll leave the number."

"Since when do Jewish people live in Short Hills? They couldn't be real Jews believe me."

"They are real Jews," I said (Goodbye, Columbus 44)

The above discourse between Aunt Gladys and Neil discloses that the upper-class Jews are relinquishing their culture and traditions. The lower-class Jews tend to keep the upper class at bay. Posnoch states about Aunt Gladys' rhetoric polemic: "Aunt Gladys' suspicion about Patimkins

that whether they have genuine Jewish ethnicity or botched or self-styled, such suspicion raises anxiety in her. (101). We again get a picture of Aunt Gladys as a typical Jewish woman, even though she frequently uses Jewish parlance. Aunt Gladys says:

"Don't feel upset, Neil. You sound upset. It is a Jewish holiday. I mean, you should be off."

"That's right, I said. 'I'm an orthodox Jew, for God's sake, I ought to take advantage of it."

The Jewish class in America possesses certain features; one of them is a bulging nose which remains a source of humorousness in the novella. For example, the two classes of Jews mentioned in the novella make fun of the size and shape of their noses. While Neil is philandering with Brenda Patimkin, he feels sorry for his nose when he detects that she is looking at his nose. According to Roth, the nose is a humorous feature of Jews. In addition, that nose determines the Jewishness of a character. Brenda's father got his nose operated upon, and that has been humorously described. They want to jettison their grotesque nose:

"Why"

"My nose"

"What"

"I'm afraid of my nose. I had it bobbed."

"What?"

"I had my nose fixed."

"What was the matter with it?"

"It was bumpy."

"A lot" (Goodbye, Columbus 11)

Since Neil comes from lower class family, hence, he has no problem with his bumpy nose. On the other hand, Patimkins are conscious of their noses. They want to jettison the nose, which is a real characteristic of their being Jew.

Brenda is living a life of chic and luxury, and on her own, she wants to get whatever she wishes. Roth has the priority in his novella to satirize the life that Jews are living in the 1960s. Neil has the proclivity to become nouveau riche by joining the Patimkins family. Brenda leads Neil by the nose, and Neil obeys her. She wants to be victorious, whether it's a pyrrhic victory. Brenda's father has an unhealthy influence over her daughter, and it wreaks incessant mental suffering on her. One critic has euphemistically stated: "This impersonality was far removed from the display of

temperament that animated 'Goodbye, Columbus' as the life of bitch heroine, Lucy Nelson, so meagre so arduous, is from that of the bitchy Brenda Patimkin" (Solotaroff, 1986: 45). When Brenda arrives in a place to take a jump in the swimming pool, she asks Klugman to hold her glasses, she was least caring about his looks and did not look at his face. It also seems that she is not taking him seriously but rather considering him her page. She does not care about Neil's physiognomy or appearance. Kimmage says: "Brenda has journeyed so far into America that she never quite sees Neil from Newark." (Kimmage 2012: 67). Brenda's acts spell out Roth's views about upper-class Jewish society during the 1960s.

Brenda spins jokes which are light in their nature. When Brenda is with Neil, her humour exalts. She uses puns and undertones while conversing with Neil Klugman. Neil Klugman says: "I had come a long way since that day she'd said to me on the phone, "Fancy-shmancy" (*Goodbye, Columbus* 43). The phrase uttered by Brenda has several meanings. Firstly, its origin can be traced to the Yiddish language, which reflects the Hebraism of Brenda. This phrase, "Fancy-shmancy" also has the meaning that some event or gala which is fabulous or something which is lively and full of élan. One dictionary has described this phrase as "beyond one's social class". It also can be suggested here that Brenda might have implied the meaning of "beyond one's social class". If we have a deep analysis of this phrase, it may refer to the social status of Neil Klugman.

Philip Roth also used criticism in his novella. Roth has done that to show how crevice has been created in real Jewish traditions and cultures. Brenda's mother is not clinging to the old traditions and values rather, she looks quite iconoclastic of Jewish tradition because she has joined an upper class. She considers Neil as a different type of Brenda's boyfriend. She shows acute indifference to Neil. Therefore, Neil feels that he is like a maid or page in her house. When Neil calls on Mrs Patimkin, she overlooks him. A dialogue between Mrs Patimkin and Brenda is interesting whereby they are discussing Neil:

Mrs Patimkin: *Where do you live, Bill?*

Brenda: *Neil*

Mrs Patimkin: *Did not I say Neil?*

Julie: *you said, "Where do you live, Bill?" (Goodbye, Columbus 20)*

When the discussion is going on between Brenda, Mrs Patimkin and Patimkin refer to Neil Klugman in one way or another way, but the way how they deal with Neil in their discussion shows that they give no weightage to Neil and are measly concerned about him. Brenda's father ridicules Neil when he says Neil that you eat like a bird. "The banality of the conversation has to stand on its own, and we are immersed among a family of strangers making jokes that we don't altogether understand: (Raban 1986: 23). Both the parents have realized that Neil and Brenda have developed intimacy, they write a letter to Brenda to convey their feelings, and even Mr Patimkin says to Brenda in the letter that he will purchase the coat which she likes. Both parents of Brenda shows bizarre and uncanny attitude. Roth uses humour to portray his milieu and society. The Jewish reviewers have criticized Roth's portrayal of the Jewish family and Jewish society in the 1960s. Moreover, "American Jews' use of comedy to mitigate ambivalences surrounding assimilation, as well as gender and generational tensions within Jewish communities and individual families" (Materson, 2009). Mrs Patimkin is delineated as a true Jew where men having Jewish ethnicity are promoting Gentiles. The critics have also opined: Many Jewish men take women as an incarnate of devout Judaism that dismisses them, and their incapability to achieve heterosexual amorous goals nurtures questions about religious identity. (Fahy, 2000).

Roth has used different types of humour for Aunt Gladys and Neil, while the upper-class strata have dealt with different types of humour. The upper class frequently used vituperation with each other, and such slang has forced the critics to term Mr Roth as anti-Semitic. The novella is fraught with such examples in which vituperation is used. One of the attendants in the wedding ceremony, while talking with Neil, says: "Well, our little Radcliffe smarty, what have you been doing all summer?" "Growing a penis". There is another example of such language used by the upper class when Brenda says to Neil that she believes in oral love. Neil fails to comprehend what Brenda means by oral love, whether she is talking about oral sex or something else.

In the wedding ceremony of Brenda's brother, we can find more examples of humour which is

not raunchy in nature. Different characters had different discourses with each other. One of the uncles of Brenda is such a person whose dialogues are full of humour.

"I'll tell you something one good thing happened to me in my whole life. Two may be. Before I came back from overseas, I got a letter from my wife – she wasn't my wife then. My mother-in-law found an apartment for us in Queens. Sixty-two fifty a month it cost. That's the last good thing that happened."

"What was the first?"

"What first?"

"You said two things," I said

"I don't remember. I say two because my wife tells me I'm sarcastic and a cynic. That maybe she won't think I'm such a wise guy." (Goodbye, Columbus 85)

Upper-class society Jews have different predilections when they use humour in their speech, while the lower strata Jews use different humour. Aunt Gladys is much more orthodox and has fidelity. On the other hand, Patimkins are emancipated and have got outright *carte blanche*. The upper-class Jews have even souls of humour.

Conclusion

Roth has presented all the major characteristics of Jews living during the 1960s. Aunt Gladys and Neil are real Jews. Aunt Gladys frequently uses those terminologies which are associated with Jews, and she refers to Hannah Schreiber, B'nai Brith dance, Rosh Hashana, Jewish holidays etc. Neil's aunt also intends to follow Jewish tradition and has a touch of Hebraism in her language. Brenda and her family, who belong to the upper class, are prone to derision and sexuality. They want to become part and parcel of consumer society. That's why Roth criticizes them. A comparative study of three major novels by Philip Roth – "Portnoy's complaint", "Goodbye Columbus", and "American Pastoral" also highlights the existence of humourism and Judaism in all these novels. Roth has failed to stave off his mind predilection in each of his novels. We will even find the background of novels, terminology of novels, and the expression and dialogues of characters smeared with Hebraism, Judaism and humourism. Sometimes, even though it seems that they are part and parcel of each other cannot be easily disjoined.

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