

Assimilation and Solidarity in Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*

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The most prolific period in American literature emerged when the immigration restrictions became less strict in the 1960s. The stage was set for the rich multicultural setting in the period. From *My Jewish Learning* we understand,

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.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century young new Jewish writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow and Philip Roth dealt impressively with the experience of immigrants in the United States of America. As the world passes through different stages in the field of politics, social life, scientific developments and economic welfare, the questions of assimilation and solidarity arises increasingly. Certainly the problems in the assimilation stage the immigrants are left with options to stick to their traditions. It is in such a set up the Jewish American writer Philip Roth (1933-2018) came out with his writings embodying therein the features for investigation. Roth provides insight into Jewish American life as it is lived each day. He explains what is important to contemporary Jewish Americans. An article in *My Jewish Learning* reads,

Roth writes about Jews who are financially comfortable yet culturally adrift. Because of their comfort, they can afford to be critical of both their Jewish and American worlds. So instead of feeling more at home in America, they feel even more alienated.

Roth experienced a creative reawakening. In *The Ghost Writer* (1979), he closely studies the assimilation principle. It is a study in literary paternity. This is Roth's tenth novel. Nathan, the

central character, arrives for a sixteen hour over night stay with Lonoff, a writer who is similar to Bernard Malamud.

The protagonist in *The Ghost Writer* Nathan Zukerman is a writer. He is a 23-year old postulate to the life of art, arrives for an overnight visit with Lonoff. The action of the novel takes the form of a memoir written decades later by the mature Nathan. It follows his youthful self to his literary idol, E.I. Lonoff. Both Nathan and Lonoff are Jewish Americans. They have the same philosophy of life with enough post-war Jewish experience.

The plot of the novel is almost on the lines of Henry James' *The Middle Years*. From *The Middle Years*, Lonoff has extracted and pasted on his wall an artistic motto:

Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The
rest is the madness of art (77)

Nathan eagerly reads and memorizes the lines of Henry James before he completes his visit. One other houseguest is a 26-year old Amy Bellette, a former student of Lonoff. She is attractive and looks somewhat like Anne Frank who narrowly escaped the Nazis' attempt to kill her. This resemblance and impression make Nathan come out with fantasy with Amy Bellette. Nathan thought if she (Amy) were Anne in actual life and if she (Anne) only gives her approval to marry him, she would solve all his problems. Anne would be "the unchallengeable answer" to Jewish criticism. (72)

The period of action in the novel is 1956. *The Ghost Writer* probes the lives of characters that have attained a mature level in their growth during 1950s. It has its social gaze on uneducated people from the small towns in America. The novel *The Ghost Writer* proved that Roth achieved perfection in his portrayal of character and theme.

Haven, Cynthia's article '*The novelist's obsessions with language*': Philip Roth on writing, the future of language and "*The Ghost Writer*" reads, "Roth's obsession, moment by moment, is with language: finding the right next word but not the right next word as an American-English word". The language of Roth reflects the mundane the characters in a forthright Zukerman discovered a solution to a literary problem that had bedeviled him since early in his career.

The novel *The Ghost Writer* circles round a relationship involving Nathan (the narrator) E.I. Lonoff (writer) and Amy Bellette (apprentice to Lonoff). At the beginning of the novel Nathan arrives at Lonoff's house in retreat from his cloying Newark upbringing and from his Jewish parents Nathan plays the role of an onlooker as the narrator Josef Sommer in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*.

Roth tells the story of complex pattern, "Nathan reveals to the reader an extraordinary possibility: that Amy Bellette is none other than the legendary Anne Frank (the heroine-author of the famous "Diary of Anne Frank"), the girl everyone believed has been killed by the Nazis! on the model of Henry James' *The Middle Years*.

Roth's aim and pursuit in the novel is to unravel the mystery and tangle which is present between love and literary mindscape (mental or psychological memories) that the couple Nathan and Amy encounter.

In the literary career, Nathan's fiction is not amenable to his family members and the Jewish people. They have bitter feeling on Nathan's writings. In order to set matters right they turned to Judge Leopold Wapter who is a local prominent Newark Jew for advice. The Wapters are exactly the sort of commanding figures, conventional and hierarchical spokesmen, for a moral view of literature. The Judge conveys his firm opinion, "I do believe that, like all men, the artist has a responsibility to his fellow man, to the society in which he lives, and to the cause of truth and justice." (98)

With opening challenge Leopold's wife asked Nathan, "If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?"(102)

Usually Nathan rejects the counsel of Wapter and feels that he stands above such petty concerns. Nathan's real father who is an angry and conscientious critic says, "people don't read art, but only about 'people'".

The art as well as the artist can be judged as how the characters are portrayed in the art well as by the artist. The lesson of Nathan's visit to Lonoff is that the writer owes more to people than to art. Lonoff himself says to Nathan.

"I'll be curious to see how all come out someday. It could be an interesting story. You're not so nice and polite in your fiction; he said.

"You're a different person".

[Nathan] "Am I?"

[Lonoff] "I should hope so"

Feeling confident, Lonoff concludes, as a writer Nathan grows up, assumes responsibility and learns that his task is to get his people "come out someday," to come out right and true to themselves.

The primal literary visit with Lonoff enables Nathan to learn that the true interest of art lies not in the sacred hush of art and its special claims, but the true interest of art lies in the intricate and tortured inter-relationships between people who do what they can for one another in passion. Only with this passion and compassion between one another, and only with solidarity can life go on without any conflicts or differences. Thus, solidarity gets itself a "shot in the arm".

With the storyline and background plot, Roth moves to a new rural New England setting. The gesture makes Nathan to become Lonoff's spiritual son and finally Amy's sexual partner. This explicit transformation proceeds to cut down much of the Jewish background so as to move over to a broader spectrum of Judaic-Christian world.

In the novel, *The Ghost Writer*, towards the close Lonoff does not leave Hope. He will not lose her because he feels that he is carrying with him a sense of responsibility to her, “Oh, Hopie,” he says tenderly when she threatens to leave”.

Hope will have none of it, “There is his religion of art, ... Hope shouts at Amy “*rejecting life!*”. *Not* living is what he makes his beautiful fiction *out* of!” There is another possibility of rejecting life. If Amy and Florence represent life to him (Lonoff), then by rejecting Amy he rejects life. Lonoff does so because he shares the wisdom that Dencombe in Henry James’ short story *The Middle Years* has also come to experience.

“We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.” These words of James are pasted on the wall of Lonoff’s study room. They are almost Roth’s motto! The implication is that the artist’s responsibility is to the very things he doubts the most, that is, his deeper commitments. The people he loves, to whom he “gives what he has” (82).

What Nathan wants to call, “the religion of art”, Lonoff (like Henry James) prefers to call “the madness of art” (85) because the artist is first of all human being and exists in service to others. If they do services to humanity the wizardry, the revenge is all due to the madness of art. Responsibility of artists and affection to the living beings especially to human beings will certainly promote solidarity among their associates.

In a digitized version of an article from ‘The New York Times’ Gass, William H writes in his *Deciding to do the Impossible* that

every Jew, except for the secular, corrupt, pluralistic and skeptically minded Nathan, believes it essential that every Jew believe the same as every other Jew, achieve the solidarity of the Wailing Wall, el-Mabka, ‘place of weeping’ and mourning the destruction of the Temple and praying for its rebuilding at the site of the Western Wall.

Philip Roth has said that in his career of writing, he more or less wrote the same book over and over again. It is clear then that he sought to write works that resounds with a particular kind of timelessness. This trait involves mankind’s living together in peace and amity. The virtue of solidarity is seen through all such stories as Roth himself has experienced the prejudices and imbalances in the art of living. This is not an exception to *The Ghost Writer*.

In its vast accumulation of details, its different types of alternating chronological presentation of consciousness and the shared knowledge of the people that are presented by Roth in *The Ghost Writer* strengthen the basic fabric of modern tendencies of assimilation and solidarity. McClurg, Jocelyn in “USA TODAY” writes,

Philip Roth, the prize-winning novelist and fearless narrator of sex, death, assimilation and fate, from the comic madness of “Portnoy’s Complaint” to the elegiac lyricism of “American Pastoral,” died at age 85 in 2018.

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